

## Across the swamp

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*Since turkey season opens Saturday, April 2, I thought this week and next, I would tell you a couple true turkey hunting stories to get your wattle and snood all aworking. I may even join Big Daddy for a hunt myself. JLS*

**By JOHN L. SLOAN**

It could be raining. The dew is dripping from the trees so heavily it could be rain. I am getting wet and glad it isn't cold. Again, the coyote sings and again the gobbler answers. He is across the swamp and we will have to hurry if we are to try for him. We have walked some distance from the where we parked the truck. It is almost time for the sky to change clothes from funeral black to church gray.

Eddie starts out at a fast walk. Eddie Salter knows this swamp better than I know my office floor. That is why I am so surprised when he steps into the creek. Fortunately, it is only three feet deep and the drop was less than a yard.

He shakes like a yard dog, dislodging both water and mud and mumbling in his mouth-full-of-grits lower Alabama mixture of Geechee and Swahili. Off we go again. The moon is up and that is the only light. It filters through the leaves of the cypress and tupelo and various gums and oaks. It reminds me a little of Queen Anne's lace where it strikes the ground and splatters into filigree.

We slog through a knee-deep slough and pause to listen. Somewhere a boat motor fires to life and the gobbler answers and another tom in turn answers him...then a third. I cannot see it but I know Eddie is smiling, as am I. I breathe deeply of the moist air so thick you can chew it.

Then a fourth.

Salter is a master at turkey hunting. He is a past World Champion caller and has hunted the swamps and ridges around Brewton, AL all his life. He is also a call manufacturer and barber.

Last night he gave me a haircut. I didn't know I needed one. He also gave me a one of his signature calls. That I did need.

I still have the call though I have not hunted turkeys in quite some time. It has never been one of my favorite things to do and now that I am not quite the track star or hiker I once was, I just don't go.

Years back I did enjoy an outing now and then just for the smells and the sounds.

We stand panting in black water. I think of all the things that may well be swimming around my legs. Water moccasins come first to mind. I never much cared for them. Today I still don't. "Try your call." Salter says. "Just make a couple short yelps."

I do so. Eddie sighs. "I'll do the calling." He murmurs and fills the near-dawn air, redolent with the smell of honeysuckle and fecundity that only a southern swamp can produce with the unmistakable sounds of a lovesick hen. Gobblers all the way to the Florida line answer.

On we go and soon my knee-highs hit solid ground. "Go that way a liddle piece and set up by a big tree. Call a liddle if you hef to but not loud and not too much," he says, pointing in a direction I can't see. I nod, which he can't see and start off.

I count the steps 250, 251; I stop because I walked into a big magnolia tree. I gather a limb or two by the light of the now graying sky and stick them in the ground for cover in front of me. I settle back against the tree. That will cover me from the back.

The dew is still falling but daylight is coming to the swamp. Every few minutes I hear the gobbles. They are not that far away. I slide my call out and lay it close to hand. Quietly I jack a shell into the chamber of the old Model 97, Winchester pump. I yelp softly and the air shatters no more than 35 yards from me.

I sit very still.

The rose-colored light suffuses the swamp and tendrils of mist leak upward from the puddles of water. I liken them to pieces of spaghetti turned upside down. I hear a raspy hen fire off. I count them. Nine times, she yelps. The gobbler and two more answer. I know it is Eddie calling. Since he lost the finger, nine is as high as he can count. Then a male owl hoots his allowed six times. The female always calls eight.

I can see the outline of the gobbler pretending he is a gandy dancer on a high tree limb 50 yards away. Through a gap in the trees, I see what appears to be an old barn much like the one behind Eddie's dad's house. That is where we parked the truck in the dark.

A screen door slams and the gobbler answers then flies down. When he hits the ground, he stretches his neck and the bronze bead of my shotgun covers up his head. Twenty yards. I had forgotten how bad that gun kicked. My gobbler is kicking in the leaves.

I rush to admire him. Long beard and spurs and a million colors. Then I hear the master shoot. I kneel with my bird for a minute and then hear, "Jawn. Walk tode the barnlut. I'll meetcha dere."

I do as told and can now easily see our truck. We have walked about a mile circle. However, we have two fine birds. Eddie's brother, Dewan comes out and takes our picture with birds on a big log. Somewhere a Blue John harks his morning hark and another gobbler answers. Dewan says, "Edduh, gimme you gun a minute and I'll go fetch that one."

A few minutes later I hear the gun speak twice and Dewan returns with another gobbler. He is wearing a dark green T-shirt and blue jeans. I mention that I had never heard him call. "Dewan don't call." Eddie told me.

That is how you hunt across the swamp.

Our spring turkey season opens this Saturday at 30 minutes before daylight. It will close on May 15. The limit is one bearded bird per day, not to exceed four per year. We have plenty of turkeys in Wilson and surrounding counties and have ample days to hunt and a limit that should provide plenty of table fare. I'm sure Big Daddy, Big Bird, The Reflector and Hiz Honor will all be out yelping and putting and generally acting the fool. Heck, I may join them.

Turkey hunting can be dangerous. Please hunt safely and good luck.

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