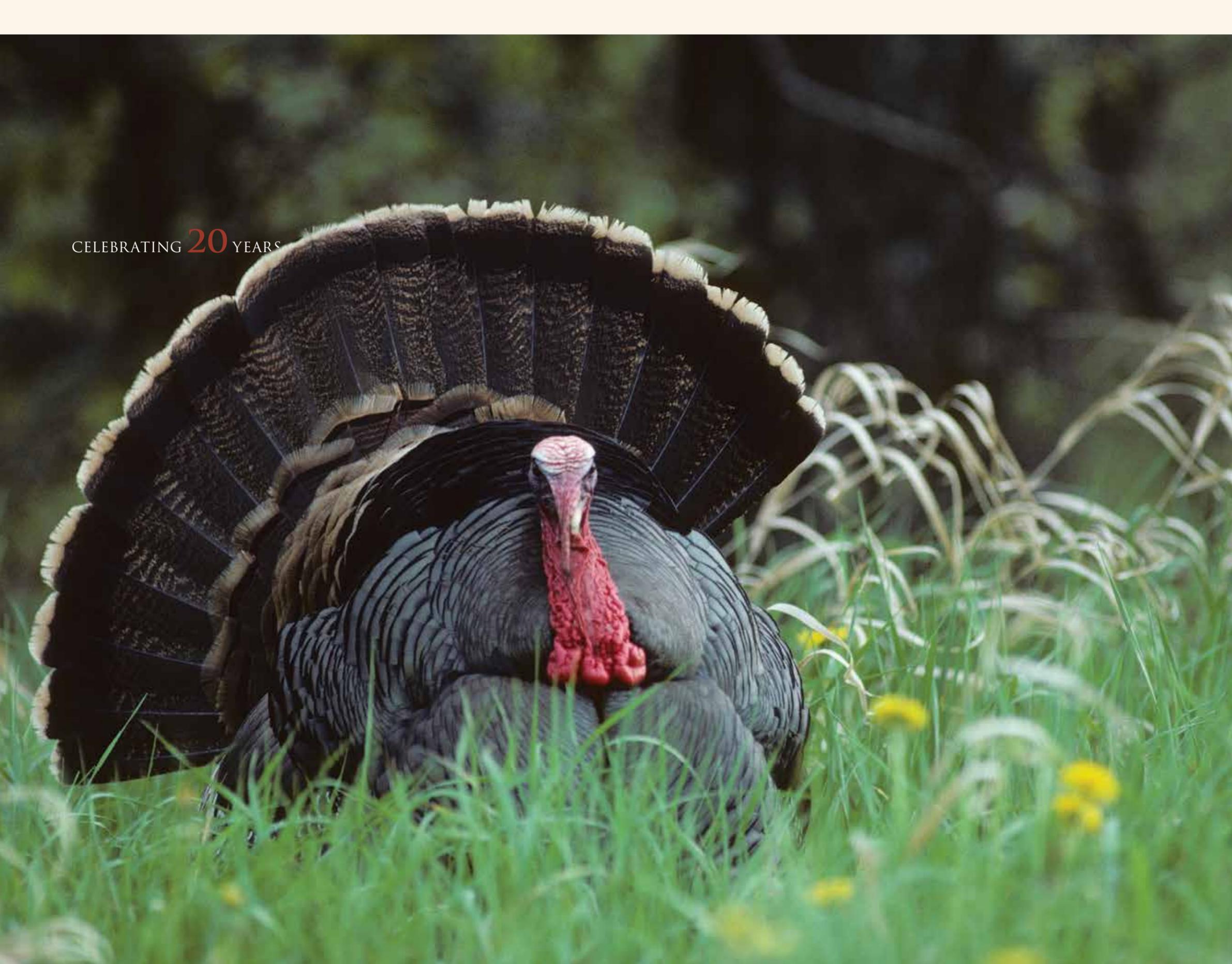


CELEBRATING 20 YEARS



FROM THE VAULT

One Huge Turkey

Solitude, Freedom and Atavism

WRITTEN BY JOHN HOLT

EXCERPTED FROM *Kicking Up Trouble: Upland Bird Hunting in the West*

I HAD ONLY THE VAGUEST IDEA WHAT TIME IT was. Very early, for sure. Certainly not 5 a.m. yet. The Ponderosa pines were visible as towering, many-armed demons standing tall around me in the dark. The stars were still out, shining intensely and the first suggestions of a false dawn glowed faintly on the edges of the hills and bluffs. Long needles carpeted the ground, covering patches of lichen-covered rock and matting last year's dry grass. The spring had been unseasonably warm so far, and dry. Scant moisture had fallen and the melting snow was long gone, soaked up by the greedy ground.

My feet crunched on the duff, a brittle, hollow sound. Trying to find the roost tree I'd discovered yesterday was proving to be troublesome. The thick-trunked pine should be right around here only a few hundred yards from my turkey camp, such as that was.

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No water, a small fire ring, the back of the truck serving as a kitchen and my sleeping bag and tarp passing for a bedroom. Austerity has a well-remembered ring, but one I'm comfortable with on the road or out in the sticks.

The drive over to this sparsely populated part of south-east Montana was six or 700 miles, 12 hours or more, but this location was one of the best places in the West for hunting the large birds — both in the spring and in the autumn. Back home you had to put in for a turkey permit and pray for the luck of the draw if you wanted to hunt the things in the Flathead Valley. There were less than 200 openings available



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and the odds were long. Out this way all you needed to do was walk into a sporting goods store in Billings or down in Sheridan and pay for the various permits and a conservation license, a total of less than 15 bucks [in 1995] (approximately \$70 if you were from out-of-state) and an additional few dollars for the fall.

A friend had showed me this place years ago in what proved to be a hunt of heroic, slightly mad proportions. Now I come back at every opportunity to spend a little time perched on this pine-forested bluff that looks out over miles and miles of rolling hills and eroded coulees. The varying shades of green displayed by the native grasses, small cactus, pine needles and sage blended easily with the ochres, buffs and subtle pinks of the rock formations and exposed earth. This was wild, unspoiled country and I'd never seen another

hunter in all the years, not even at the small store some miles distant that served as a post office and gas station. One pickup truck was the extent of human visitation during my undisciplined forays.

That was the main reason I drove all this way. To be alone, by myself. The turkeys were just an excuse, though a damn good one in my mind. I've not shot many of the Merriam's in this brief span of years, but I know where they are, to some extent. The trick is in the timing. Too early and the birds are scattered all over hell and back. Even the locals can't find the things. Show up after the spring procreational soiree has completed its bizarre dance and the situation is similar. The turkeys are dispersed and even if they are trotting around in the trees or strutting in the grassy meadow, they are more than a shade reluctant to come to my calls, amateur efforts at best, but productive during the peak of breeding season. In truth, when the birds are in full rut, so to speak, discordant notes bombed away from the belly of a tuba would work. Neophyte scratchings on a hollow cedar box sound like a symphony to the lovestruck turkeys. At the first annoying notes, again if the timing is right, gobblings emanate from hills in all directions. Pure lunacy. Lovely sounds singing through the air.

THE ROOST TREE I was trying to find right now was one of several I'd found in the area. Arriving in the afternoon, I set up camp, grilled a burger and sipped a few gin-and-tonics (no limes, Spartan trip). Around the time the sun started fading over the horizon, casting the countryside in an eerie orange-gold light, a series of "gobbles," "putts" and assorted other forms of turkey madness issued from the coulee behind me. The cacophony advanced nearer finally culminating in thwacking sounds of wings beating and some disgruntled sounds from the birds as they settled into their perches for the night. What a crew. I was sure I knew which tree they'd pull into. The other three were growing along a gentle slope a half-mile away. Too far for the bird's racket to have sounded so close to camp. Tomorrow I'd shoot my turkey and then head to a small river running freely even farther in the middle of nothing where I'd try my hand at some untamed rainbows that ran to good size. Killing a couple of weeks in these parts was almost too easy.

Standing well alone in this country, looking away toward Wyoming in the south and Billings many miles north, the

familiar feeling of loneliness descended. Not unwelcome, another reason to be out here and away from the smothering security of civilization where it seems I never have the chance to feel anything but what I'm told or programmed to feel. Do this. Think that. Buy into another administration con. Don't step out of line. That's where the loneliness comes in handy. The feeling is a means to connect with life, to turn briefly humble without being publicly humiliated. We all get enough of that trying to earn a living.

That's the power of this country, a place so foreign to most of us, alien to me at times, that we don't have a natural clue about what's taking place. Lightning strikes an exposed seam of coal and a smoldering fire starts, watched by no one. The coal may smoke and flare into flame, sizzling for centuries, until it is doused by heavy rain and runoff or burns its way through to the other side of the hill or runs out of fuel. The fire is so hot, mud stone and sandstone is baked granite-hard and kiln-cured to the color of dried blood. A 50-foot seam of coal may cook 200 feet of rock lying above. (What do the mule deer and the coyotes and the turkeys think about this? Probably nothing at all. There's too much thinking going on as it is. Confused brain noise that is detectable, faintly, in the distant glow of Billings late at night. City rap. Disgusting stuff.) The clinker eventually builds up into huge beds of porous rubble storing millions of gallons of water that seeps down from the efforts of wicked storms raging on up above. Artificial wells naturally made. Trees and brush grow best in these spots and wild animals know them for their water. There are several such places near camp, wild drawing cards for the Merriam's.

I built up the fire and fried a fat pork chop and some onions in butter and garlic, threw together some salad that was liberally doused with Paul Newman's famous dressing. It was all I could find at a small store some hours up the road. I was hungry and finished off the meal in minutes, then restocked the dwindling fire, ignited a cheap cigar from Connecticut, built a tall drink and enjoyed the night. Coyotes howled away from the surrounding ridges, talking to each other. They knew the turkeys were here, too. Earlier, I'd heard a few calls from the packs, then some miles off, as the birds began to roost. I'd have some competition, but hopefully the dogs weren't armed. Climbing into the sleeping bag, I tried to make sense out of the sky, but my mind faded to black and I was out until maybe 4 and now I was trying to find that damn roost tree and then a place to hide.

THE STARS WERE DISAPPEARING and the sky on the east was actually turning to soft blue when I found the tree. The ancient pine, several feet thick at the base, gnarled and

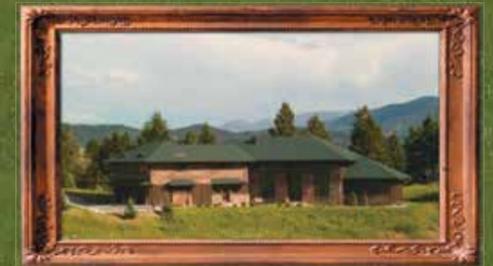
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I'd shoot my turkey and then head to a small river running freely in the middle of nothing, where I'd try my hand at some untamed rainbows that ran to good size.

twisted from its long life, hundreds of yards to be sure, loomed above me 100 yards away, thick roots clinging to thin soil and crumbling sandstone ledges. Dark, lumpy objects, a lot of them, were hunkered down on limbs 20 or more feet up. As quietly as possible I crept toward a downed pine, its bark black and the exposed wood weathered gray. The cover was less than 40 yards from the birds. Crouching down, I crawled back into an opening in the branches and situated myself so that I had a shot through a man-sized window in the limbs. Sitting on my butt, knees drawn to my chest, I rested the shotgun, an old Savage

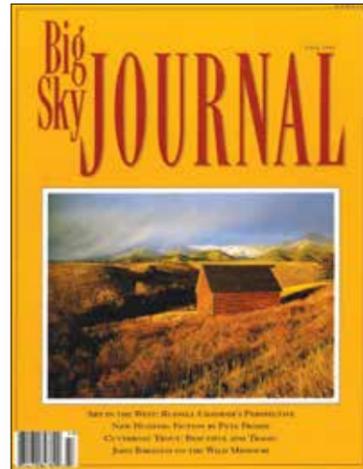
.22-twenty gauge, in the space between my legs. I was afraid to move or make any noise, but cautiously practiced sighting in on where I thought the turkeys would land, hopefully in just a few minutes. They were notorious early risers.

Long moments passed and my mind wandered far into the coulees. I wondered what it was like living out here all year as a homesteader. The climate was extreme, fluctuating crazily between searing heat and teeth-cracking cold. No wind in summer and fierce gales in winter. Sleet and dust choking the periods in between. What a way to go. What drove men to leave the safety of towns and cities to risk starting a new life out in this desolation? I knew the answer, for me, at least.

There was freedom in this frightening vastness. A chance to do what I wanted by myself with no one looking over my shoulder. Knowing that what happened, happened and the consequences be damned, was intoxicating. Yes, I knew why I would have taken a chance on this country and I could understand the unexplained drive in others 100 years ago.

The sky was now a washed-out robin's-egg blue across the horizon. The lumps in the old tree were stirring, making small sounds. Not clucks or purts or anything like that, more like the first sounds a person makes when he rides up out of a deep sleep.

I readied the gun and breathed shallowly. Then the



turkeys started dropping out of the trees in the growing light. They sounded like sacks of cement hitting the ground and it was not a vision blessed with gracefulness. The birds didn't bounce, rather they went thump then tried standing on stiff legs, shaking their feathers and tentatively working big wings. I was reminded of a game where I saw a former Chicago Cubs' player, Dave Kingman, rounding second base, arms windmilling, long legs pumping as he gallantly tried to stretch a double into a leggy (very leggy) triple. He slid and never reached third, tagged dead out by the length of a Rolls-Royce.

The crowd howled, then cheered at

the unconscious audacity of the effort. A Chicago sports writer once described Kingman running the bases to the effect that he looked like an empty paint can being tossed from the window of a car doing 60 on a bumpy road. I stifled a laugh. That's how these turkeys looked. Ungainly, not really with the program.

In a minute or so a disorderly group of the birds was milling about in the dead grass that was giving way to new, fresh green sprouts. I'd never seen this many jakes together, did not know if the hens roosted with them. I doubted this. Breeding was a contentious act of horny territoriality.

I sighted in on two males trying to determine the largest. They were both huge, well over 20 pounds, with long beards, blue-white heads giving way to ugly dusty-red wattles hanging from their chins and necks.

I KNEW THE .22 WOULD KILL either with a head shot, but I was unsure of my ability to hit what I aimed at. I was excited and shaky. I flipped the selector to the lower barrel, loaded with a three-inch magnum ("Magnooms" as a friend calls them) 20-gauge filled with copper-plated No. 2s. Upland birds, yes, but more like big game. A lot of energy was needed to drop a Merriam with a flank shot. The turkey on my left walked a few yards closer and gave me an angled profile. A regal bird

now standing dead still. I aimed at an area at the base of the neck and fired.

"Boom." The concussion rocked through the coulees and over the bluffs. The turkeys ran, leaped for the air and made sounds I'd never heard out of a bird before. Yelps, gagging gobbles and strained clucks. An avian Chinese fire drill. On the ground was my turkey, on its side, one wing beating a dying tune. I stood up, almost falling back down, legs gone stiff with the waiting. I was wired, high on adrenaline and weaved my way the short distance to the fallen creature. The others in the flock were gone. Out of sight and sound. I'd hit this one with a number of pellets in the neck making a ragged, bloody mess. The shoulder and wing were damaged as well, though I doubted these wounds would have done in the bird. I set the gun in the grass and lifted the Merriam by the legs. It felt heavy, like a brace of very big channel catfish.

I let out a scream that had atavism written all over it and just looked at the bird. That yell and all I could think was, "What a huge god-damned turkey." One of the highest things I'd ever done outdoors and all I could think was, "What a huge god-damned turkey." Moments of such profundity are stark, raving amazing, aren't they?

Walking back to camp with the bird slung over my shoulders, wings extended, I could feel the waning heat of the animal through my vest and shirt. Field dressing it was anticlimatic. I left one foot and a complete leg attached for other purposes of sex identification in case I happened upon a game warden. Fat chance. The tail feathers, large, mottled bronze, black and tan with a few hints of gray, were stowed carefully in a large freezer bag. Souvenirs for my children and potential wings for grasshoppers I would tie for late-summer fly fishing. I hung the bird so that it cooled quickly in the morning air, then wrapped it in a couple of thick garbage bags before storing it in a cooler filled with block and cube ice.

I made some dense black coffee, Golden Sumatran, added a dash or two of bourbon and toasted the turkey, the country, the day, and my good fortune. If only all hunts were like this one. Again, fat chance, but I was a happy boy at the moment. Coyotes were barking on the ridges. They must have wined the turkeys and I heard a lone gobbler way off to the west away from the dogs.

I'd take a nap and then break camp. The rainbows were calling me now. **BSJ**

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