

TEXAS HILL COUNTRY OUTDOORS



Why REAL MEN live DANGEROUSLY

By Steve Ramirez

I held my weapon at the ready and stepped ever so carefully though the early morning half-light. Over my head lay a myriad of stars. Under my boots lay rocky pathways and rattlesnakes coiled neatly in my imagination. As the first glow of morning hinted along the eastern hills I set up; my back against an ancient oak tree, my eyes searching the darkness for any sign of movement. I had been here before: in another time and place, camouflaged, silent, waiting for them to come before the barrel of my gun. Then as now I waited, my weapon ready, my mind extended, and my arms painful in their stillness.

It was then that I first heard him; a thunderous sound that tore through the foliage. I replied softly. Once again the forest was soaked in silence. I knew he was out there...somewhere. Perhaps he could already see me. My eyes strained to find some movement in the tangled shadows. There was none. I pulled my weapon in closer and waited. And then in a moment he was there; not fifty yards away. We had played this game for days now. Each time I thought I had him in my sights he would find me. I would see him only for a moment, like an apparition experienced through some peripheral vision that seemed untrustworthy. In that moment I knew he was there, watching me and I searched for him...and then he was gone. This time was different. This time he had failed to learn the lesson of the past few days and I had learned them all to well. At fifty yards I saw him. He eased his head up over a deadfall and as our eyes met, I pulled the trigger.

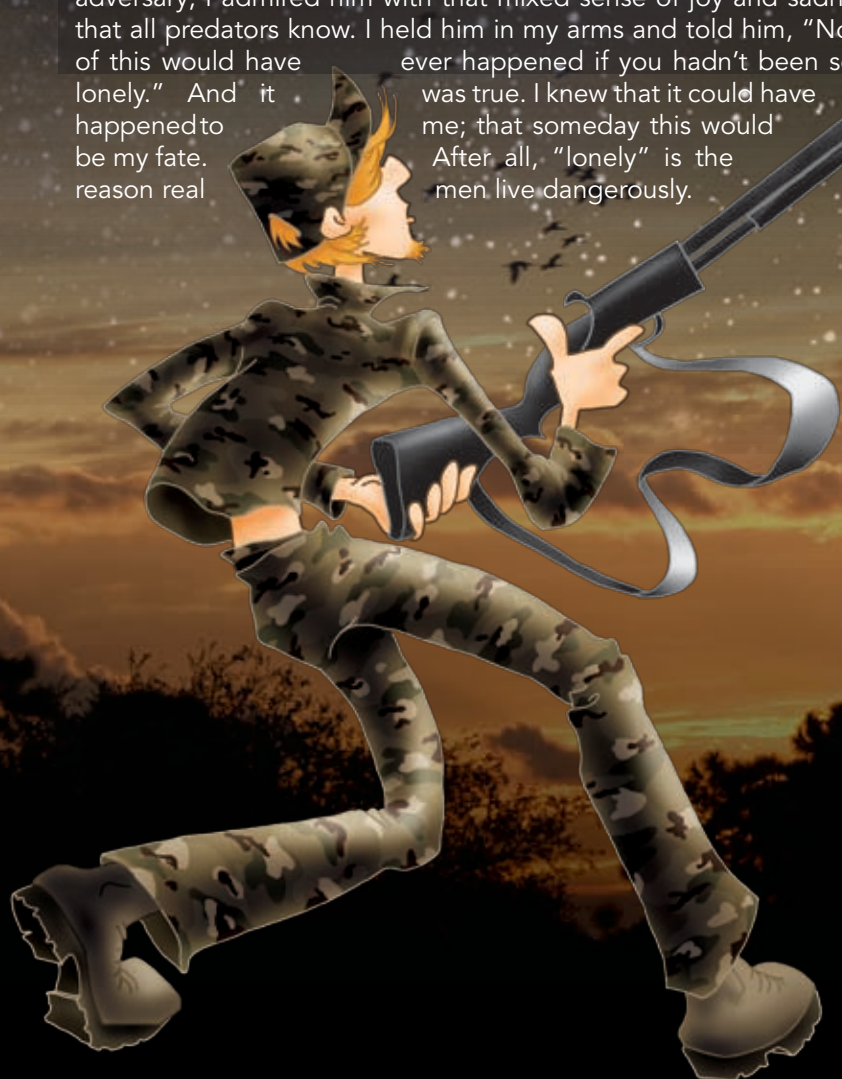
My camouflage broken with the sound of the blast I ran gasping up the hill toward where I saw him fall. He was lying there dying when I put the heel of my boot across his neck and ended it. A worthy adversary; I admired him with that mixed sense of joy and sadness that all predators know. I held him in my arms and told him, "None of this would have ever happened if you hadn't been so lonely." And it was true. I knew that it could have happened to me; that someday this would be my fate. After all, "lonely" is the reason real men live dangerously.

Any other time of year, the American wild turkey is a solitary denizen of the oaks and cedar. His senses are keen, his defenses many. But in spring, just after the first blue bonnets bloom, each old tom gets the "call of the wild," and his energies turn toward gaining the company of the fairer sex. Just like any real man, that's when the ole boys lose their minds. I can't count the times in my life that I did something stupid just to impress the beautiful young girl that was in range of my antics. I'd like to think that I was above such foolishness...but I know better. I'm a guy.

Turkey hunting is real hunting. It requires the hunter to be in touch with the environment and understand the quarry. Most of the Texas Hill Country falls within the north zone as defined by Texas Parks and Wildlife. The regular hunting season opens April 3rd and runs until May 16th. Hunters generally use 12 gauge shotguns and call the toms in by using one of the many forms of turkey calls. I use either a box or slate call because that is what works for me. Many more experienced turkey hunters use a diaphragm call that is a small membrane that fits in the hunter's mouth and simulates the sounds of a love sick hen when blown through. I don't use one because when I've tried the only way I'd ever kill a turkey is if they fell down laughing as I blow and spit and generally make noises like someone letting the air out of a balloon. This won't work because turkeys have two things: incredibly good hearing and vision and no sense of humor.

There are five types of turkey in the United States with two of them residing in Texas and only one in the hill country. The eastern turkey is as the name implies from the east and lives in the Big Thicket forest and bayous of east Texas. The Osceola turkey lives in south Florida, the Merriam's in the Rocky Mountains, the Gould's in far southern New Mexico and in old Mexico. The Texas Hill Country is the home of the Rio Grande turkey. All turkeys have a big vocabulary. They purr when they feel good and safe and they putt when they sense danger. Clucks are social chit chat and yelps are females who are advertising that if he's "real man enough" she might be willing to hang out with him. When he hears a cluck...she hears a gobble. And that is his big downfall. A turkey hunter knows that if he can sit real still and cluck real pretty, he might just get the stealthy tom to let down his guard. After all, each one of us remembers with some degree of pride and shame all the time we let down our guard, risking life and limb.

Most toms don't meet their demise each spring...they meet their mate. After all the thunderous gobbling, strutting, drumming of wings, posturing and preening, they finally get a glimpse of her through the bright green leaves of spring. They come together and have their moment, and in that moment I suspect he is truly happy. After all, she is the most beautiful hen in the forest...at least through his beady little eyes... and she chose him. In that moment the leaves seem greener, the grass more lovely, and the grasshoppers big, juicy, and easy to catch. Life is good. He turns toward her as if to say, "Hey look darlen, I caught a big one!" He is still showing off when he realizes that she is gone. ...And that's when he realizes that he is back to being alone in the woods and that hens are stealthy too. He may swear off hens forever in his moment of grief but deep down in his turkey soul he knows that it will never stick. He knows that next spring he will gobble, and strut, and risk death at the end of a hunter's shotgun barrel for the chance to find the hen of his dreams. He can't help himself...he's a guy. And that is why real men live dangerously.



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