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Incredibly, Tom Kelly is about to complete his 70th season in the Alabama turkey woods with no signs of slowing down.

Kelly, whom I consider the poet laureate of the turkey world although he is far too modest to suggest such, started his turkey hunting career as an 11-year-old under inauspicious conditions. During his turkey hunting career, he's seen Alabama's

turkey population go from virtually nil to today's half-million.

"I started turkey hunting in 1938," said Kelly, who now lives in Spanish Fort. "And, of course, there weren't enough turkeys to count. I can remember my grandfather telling my daddy that it was a pity to start it, because by the time he gets grown there ain't gonna be any. It's like telling a kid Santa Claus is going to die next week.

"In the beginning, good gosh, there was so little turkey hunting. In fact, I've got the November 1944 edition of *Field and Stream*. In it, they listed all of the hunting regulations for every state in the union and the Canadian provinces. There were also migratory bird regulations. All of that was on two pages. That year, 1944, there wasn't but three states with a spring turkey season. I think it was nine or 10 states that had a turkey season, but only three with a spring season – Alabama, Mississippi and Arkansas. And I don't think the Mississippi and Arkansas seasons were but two weeks long. I fiddled around with the number of licenses sold by counties. There were a few turkeys around here (southwest Alabama) and up around Talladega. In that year, in the entire United States, there wasn't but 1,500 spring turkey hunters. It was only three states and the seasons were short. And now, you go to one banquet and there'll be 1,500 folks."

Not only was there few turkey hunters, the birds were few and far between back then. Kelly, who now has 10 books to his credit with the publication of last year's "A Fork in the Road," said successful turkey hunters were especially revered during his early hunting years.

"If a guy killed a turkey every year, people gathered around his doorsteps to worship him when he went out to get in his car," he said. "If he killed two a year, you tried to get him in the Catholic Church so you could canonize him. And, anybody who killed three was cheating. He's baiting them up. There ain't nobody that good. It can't be done. Just ain't no way.

"I suspect in 1960 that two-thirds of the turkeys killed in this state were killed on deer drives, running in front of dogs. The guy running the hunt would stand up in front of the group and say, 'We shoot buck deer, turkey gobblers and bobcats.' And everybody on a stand had one barrel loaded with buckshot and one barrel loaded with No. 6. The first turkey I ever killed was looking back over his shoulder for the dog. Now, that ain't the way we told it, but that's the way it was. It's something about turkeys that seems to make a guy lie, by nature a liar or not, he's just gonna lie."

Kelly, whose working career consisted of everything from cruising timber to running paper mills, considers the current environment the golden age of turkey hunting and beginners are able to take accelerated courses in hunting technique.

"I've said this for a long time – a kid starting now will see more turkeys and get to fool with more turkeys in the first five years than I did in the first 20 years," he said. "The way to learn to do this is be stupid in front of turkeys. And now there are so many more turkeys to be stupid in front of than there used to be. In one respect, I think they might have been easier to kill in that you might be hearing the only turkey gobble you're going to hear all week. But, on the other hand, he might be hearing the only hen he was going to hear in 10 days. Now with the competition – I'm talking about the hen competition – he gobbles four times and there's six or seven hens under his tree. You're dead. There ain't nothing you can do except hope they walk your way when they leave.

"Now you didn't hear as many turkeys when I started, but I think the ones you heard and got to were easier to work. He didn't have the distractions. There are places now, especially that second week of the season, that it's damn near hopeless. You yelp and he gobbles and there are hens under his tree almost instantly."

When Kelly was a youth, he had free range over the countryside, although there was very little game, mainly rabbits and squirrel, as well as doves and quail. If you were lucky enough to live along the rivers and coast, you could add a few ducks to the bag.

"There weren't any deer or turkeys, but you had squirrels and quail," he said. "I think it's a different stage in the succession of the timber. When you begin to get as much timber as we have in the state now, the quail just don't do well. Turkeys began to come back as we began to have more and more timber. Plus, we don't have poor devils out there trying to raise a family on 40 acres of Norfolk sand. He raises the family with his shotgun. Those

guys killed a lot of turkeys, and deer, too.

“It is no longer socially acceptable to violate game laws. You will still hear guys in the midst of a cocktail party bragging about shooting 40 doves, but not much. It’s not socially acceptable to do it any more.”

Kelly, who runs a turkey hunting school at Westervelt Lodge each spring, said there was a noticeable difference in the number of turkeys and turkey hunters in the early ‘60s when an extensive trapping and relocation program by the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division (Game and Fish back then) was in full swing. The majority of turkeys were trapped in southwest Alabama and transplanted around the state. The relocation program has been so successful that with the addition of Morgan County next year every county in the state will have a turkey season.

Kelly said turkey biologists like Lovett Williams have revealed a great deal about turkeys that could only be realized with extensive research and the use of telemetry.

“Lovett Williams’ new book, “Turkey Hunting and Management,” is the finest thing that’s ever seen done,” Kelly said. “A guy like me, anything I know about turkeys I bootlegged by hunting turkeys, carrying a shotgun, on company time. Because of guys like Lovett, we know way more about turkeys than we did 50 years ago, and we’ve got way more timber.

“We’ve got some things happening now that if I was asked about it 30 years ago I wouldn’t have believed it. I was asked last year to go and hunt on a place within nine miles of where I live in Spanish Fort. The land used to belong to Scott Paper Company. It is a solid pine plantation. There is one knob on it with six or eight big live oak trees, and there are a couple of little creeks with nothing but black gum and sweet bay. It is so full of turkeys; they’re just everywhere you look. The guy told me he quit coming out there because he’d been out there with a turkey gobbling his brains out and he couldn’t see him. Now I don’t know what they’re eating, but I can assure you it’s not acorns. They may be getting on the telephone and having pizza sent out there, I don’t know. I killed a couple of turkeys out there and they were hog fat. So they’re eating something. People who say turkeys can’t live in pine plantations, that just ain’t so. Now, they ain’t nearly as much fun to hunt out there.”

Despite the encroaching human population, Kelly thinks Alabamians will be able to enjoy turkey hunting long after he’s gone.

“I think we’re going to be hunting turkeys 100 years from now,” he said. “Now we’re not going to be hunting them on Bienville Square or on the outskirts of Fairhope, like we used to do. But turkeys are adaptable creatures. I believe they could make it on the State Docks. I believe they could make it on the soybean that fell off the grain cars.”

Kelly considers right now the most productive time to be in the turkey woods.

“To me the last two weeks of the season are the best,” he said. “The hens are going to the nest earlier and staying on the nest a lot more. When the hens are staying on the nest, the turkeys begin to gobble again in the afternoon. When the hens are on the nest all the time, they quit gobbling on the roost because it doesn’t do any good anymore. Everybody says they’ve quit, they’ve gobbled out. It’s all over and done with, I’m sorry I ever took this thing up anyway. You can still make a turkey come to you. A turkey I hear on the roost that I go to and sit down, that gobbles after I sit down – which means I haven’t screwed him up yet, but I’ve still plenty of opportunities for stupidity, but I ain’t done any yet – I will probably call up two-and-a-half out of 10. I won’t kill two-and-a-half out of 10 because I’ll still do some dumb things.

“Those turkeys you call to on the ground and he gobbles – the last two weeks you can call up six out of 10. The odds get that much better. Now you can still dumb it up. But that time of year, you’ve got to be careful because the leaves are getting thick. Anything you can do in a minute and a half, you’d better do it. And if all you’ve got to hide behind is a spruce pine cone and two blades of grass, you’d better take it. Some of those birds will come in in two or three minutes. You’d better be ready.”

Kelly also heard the tales that if a gobbler answers you, he’s going to come to that area at some time during the day. Kelly said he’s not sure if that’s true.

“My grandfather used to swear that if a turkey ever hears you yelp he will come there if it takes to 3 o’clock in the afternoon,” he said. “If he does, the heck with him because I’m gonna be gone. I ain’t mad at turkeys. No turkey has foreclosed a mortgage or insulted my daughter. I ain’t sitting there until 3 o’clock in the afternoon listening to blue jays. I give him a reasonable amount of time, but after that, the (heck) with him.

Despite all those years in the woods, Kelly still marvels at the wild turkey and its knack for making even the most seasoned hunter look like a novice.

“After 70 years, a turkey will still do things to me that I wonder, ‘how in the (heck) did he do it?’ ” Kelly said. “I think where the fascination lies is that every time you go something happens a little bit differently - every time. And they’ve got a genius for making you look stupid.”

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