

Beginner's Guide to Turkey Calls & Calling

Box Calls

Starting with the first of several friction calls — and one of the simplest to master - we'll begin with the box call. Invented in 1897 by Henry Gibson of Dardanelle, Ark., the hinged-lid box call is a simple design. Box calls are basically two pieces of wood; a coffin-shaped tone chamber and a paddle-like striker or lid. The two pieces are fastened together loosely by a screw at one end. Today's box calls are mostly made from cedar, walnut and a host of other hard woods. Chalk or rosin is used to coat the playing surfaces to allow it to strike consistently and vibrate properly, which, in turn, produces sound.

To play or "work" a box call, lightly grasp the lid handle between the thumb, index and middle finger of the right hand while holding the box in the palm of the left. (Southpaws should reverse their hold.) Flexing the wrist, the lid is stroked across the thin, top edges of the box to produce any of several turkey calls. (See Wild Turkey Vocabulary below.)

For an alternate method of holding a box call, hold it in a vertical position with the hinged end down. Hold your hands straight out in a thumbs-up position. Grasp the bottom of the box in the left hand, while grasping the lid handle between the right index finger and thumb. The forward stroke produces a yelp. For best results, try to keep the lid in contact with the box on the forward stroke and away from the box on the non-calling return stroke. A cluck is made by placing the lid on the lip of the sound chamber and giving it a quick stroke while pulling the lid away sharply.

Box calls are best for producing the hen or gobbler "yelp," depending on how the box is tuned. The two-toned yelp is the foundation to communicating with wild turkeys. Box calls produce realistic clucks another basic call turkey hunters rely on. With practice, box calls realistically reproduce a hen's "cutting" call, which is a staccato series of clucks. Advanced callers can also produce the kee kee of a young gobbler and a rough gobble of a mature tom.

Slate-type Friction Calls

Slate calls, also known as "peg and pot" type calls, are another type of friction call and, today, come in a wide array of surface and striker materials. The earliest calls were made from a flat piece of thin wood or slate. Early strikers, or pegs, were made from hickory and other hard woods or bone. The playing surface of the earliest calls was cupped in one hand while the striker was held (like a pencil) in the opposite hand. The tip of the striker is scratched across the playing surface to produce sound.

The evolution of the modern slate call comes from a flowerpot, or more accurately, the round water-catching tray that sits beneath it. The round, shallow shape created a cup or sound chamber to hold a round piece of slate. The pot kept the fingers off the sounding board of the call, which would play havoc with creating consistent sound. It also allowed the slate sounding board to vibrate more freely, amplifying the created tones.

Today's calls come with sounding boards made of slate, glass, aluminum, ceramic and a host of other materials. Strikers come in several wood types, carbon, plastic, aluminum and more.

To properly use a slate call, grasp the pot in the left hand by forming a "C" with the index and thumb. Hold the outside edge of the pot inside the "C" and use the other fingers to give support to the bottom of the call. Hold the peg like a pencil in the right hand. Draw small circles on the sounding board to produce yelps. Pushing down firmly with the striker and pulling it in a short, straight line will create a cluck. Increase the speed of the rhythm to produce a cackle or cutting of an excited hen. Quiet purring calls, as well as louder aggravated purrs, can be mastered on the slate call. Simply allow the striker to skip across the surface as you softly draw it across the call.

Wingbone and Trumpet Calls

Crafting calls from the wing bones of wild turkeys dates back to 6500 BC, according to archeological findings of early American inhabitants. Early Americans frequently yelped up their quarry into blowgun or bow range using wingbone calls. Several wingbone calls have been unearthed and show where a single bone or multiple bones were fastened together to create a bugle-type call. One such call, dating back 4,000 to 6,000 years, is on display in the NWTF's Wild Turkey Museum in Edgefield, S.C.

Several variations of the wingbone call have been made from materials such as cane, bone, horn and other hollow, slender materials. One such call is the "Turpin Yelper" created in the early days of the 20th century by calling legend Tom Turpin of Memphis, Tenn.

Years ago, Nick Gilmore gave a turkey calling tip in a copy of Outdoor Life. Gilmore told of watching a flock of feeding turkeys from his deer stand one fall day. He was without a call to lure the flock closer, so he improvised by pulling a Bic ballpoint pen from his pocket. He pulled the guts out of his pen and used the hollow tube as a call. He put the call to his lips, puckered up and yelped one of the curious birds within range.

Instead of blowing on this call, the small mouthpiece is "kissed" with pursed lips and air is drawn inward to create several life-like turkey calls. As with any call, practice will prepare you to make yelps, clucks, kee kees, cackles and other requisite hunting calls.

Diaphragm Calls

Diaphragm calls are some of the "oldest" modern turkey calls. According to research, in 1867, Samuel McClain invented and patented a bird whistle that held a thin membrane inside a horseshoe-shaped, thin metal frame. In 1921, Henry Bridges of Maryland patented his own "sound producing device" specifically to call wild turkeys. Again, Bridges affixed a membrane material inside a horseshoe-shaped frame, which was to be held to the roof of the mouth and blown across to create a sound.

Predating these patents was the use of leaves or grass as a reed material for improvised turkey calls. The leaf was held between both hands and blown across. Early pioneers learned the craft from indigenous Americans to bring wild turkeys close for the shot.

Today's mouth diaphragms use thin latex rubber as reed material in place of green leaves. The reed material is held inside a horseshoe-shaped frame and is most commonly taped with waterproof tape. The call is placed in your mouth with rounded side to the back and is pressed to the roof of the

mouth with the tongue. Huffing breath across the reed, which causes the reed to vibrate and create sound, makes the call sound.

Because of their versatility and range, mouth diaphragms are the most widely used calls in turkey calling competitions. Realistic yelps, clucks, purrs, kee kee whistles, cackles and more can be made with some practice.

Push-Pin Calls

Also called "push-button box calls," the push-pin call is a wooden or plastic friction box similar in shape to the paddle-type box call. Instead of having an external hinged lid, it incorporates a lid that rides on a dowel that sticks through the end of the box. A spring or rubberband is used to give the paddle proper tension as it rides over a pillar inside. Pushing the rod causes the paddle to scrape over the internal pillar, which vibrates to make turkey-like sounds.

Push-button calls are the easiest turkey call for beginners to learn to use. To use a push-button call, simply hold it in either palm and push the operating rod. Slow to medium rhythmic strokes produce yelps. Quick taps on the rod produce clucks.

Wild Turkey Vocabulary

The calls of the wild turkey are a universal language. Whether you're hunting Osceola wild turkeys in Florida or Merriam's in the Rocky Mountains, the basics:

Yelp — A two-toned call that starts with a whistling "kee" and ends with a quick "oak" sound. This call means, "Here I am, come here" in turkey talk.

Cluck — A single, sharp "puck" sound that means, "Here I am, where are you?" in turkey language.

Purr — A staccato sound that, when uttered at a low volume, tells flock mates that all is well. Increase the volume and turkeys interpret it as a sign of agitation, frustration, anger or aggression.

Putt — A loud cluck uttered when turkeys are alarmed. Putting is most often shortly followed by a hasty retreat.

Kee Kee — The whistling sound uttered by young fall turkeys. When a flock is scattered the young turkeys will kee kee to each other and the boss hen until the flock regroups.

Cackle — A series of fast clucks uttered when a turkey is flying or when a hen is sexually excited.

Gobble — The grandest sound to a turkey hunter's ears, this call is uttered by the male turkeys to attract hens for breeding and to announce to the world that the tom is on watch and ready to defend his territory.