

Turkey Hunting Safety: My Story

By: John Vanover

Hunting has been a great American tradition. It is a very safe and rewarding outdoor experience that is shared by many men, women, and children across our great state of Virginia.

Hunting, especially turkey hunting, has always been part of my heritage and a passion of mine for many years. However, I was involved in a very serious hunting incident on December 7, 1998. I was sitting beside a tree randomly calling with my mouth call when another hunter (unknown to me) stalked my calling. I was mistaken for game and was shot from 67 feet away with a 3-inch 12 gauge magnum shell loaded with a # 2 by 4 shot. The shot pattern struck me in the head and chest area. Even though I was involved in a serious hunting incident, I know that hunting is a very safe sport and also one of the safest outdoor activities that we can enjoy according to statistics. I would never discourage anyone from taking their firearms hunting or just enjoying a day shooting at the range.

After being injured in my accident, it has been a long, personal, and very difficult struggle for me to get to the point of being able to fire a gun again and eventually make the transition of going back into the woods to hunt. In 2002, our Dickenson county Conservation Police Officer George Steele encouraged me to get involved in the Hunter Education Program. I had previously been volunteering for several years with our local wardens at county fairs and kids' fishing day events. Officer Steele went beyond his role as an officer for the state of Virginia, and on his own time set me up with the required classes and training that I needed to become a hunter education instructor.

Officer George Steele was very instrumental in re-introducing me back to the great sport of hunting. He approached me two years ago and told me that he was going to take me turkey hunting. I was reluctant at first, but Officer Steele reassured me that everything would be ok. I did feel safe and comfortable knowing that Officer Steele was right beside me. I am very thankful to God that I can once again enjoy and share my love and respect for the outdoors with my 12 year old nephew, Colin Rose. On our recent hunting adventures, he has harvested several squirrels, and we hope to once again pursue a gobbler this spring. If you have the opportunity, you should take a kid hunting this coming April on the Youth Spring Turkey Hunt. You can make a lifetime of cherished memories for the kid involved as well as yourself. We as older hunters can pass on our skills and traditions for the next generation.

I encourage every hunter to take a hunter education course to brush up on safety, outdoor skills, and ethics even if you have hunted for years. Every one of us, as hunters, should always strive to become more safety-conscious so that we can continue to pass on our hunting heritage to the next generation.

There are three basic safety rules that we as hunters and anyone handling a firearm should follow. They are as follows: (1) Treat every firearm as if it is loaded (2) Always control the direction of your firearm muzzle (3) Clearly identify your target and what is beyond your target. Make sure that anyone hunting with you will also follow these safety rules. Hunting and shooting firearms can be a safe and rewarding experience for all of us who go into the outdoors.

Hunting the wild turkey is a very exciting and intense sport. When that gobbler fires up and starts gobbling, your adrenaline starts flowing. Peer pressure and the

underlying desire to succeed sometimes contributes to hunting incidents. If you or your hunting buddies feel you must be successful to prove a point, it is best that you stay out of the woods. The true sportsman knows that hunting is not a competitive sport.

Remember to “hunt defensively” and follow these suggested safety tips.

- It has been proven that blaze orange can reduce the risk of hunting incidents. Virginia law does not require turkey hunters to wear blaze orange during the fall or spring gobbler season with the exception of the general firearms deer season. However, I would recommend that you wear blaze orange going into and out of the woods. You should also place a blaze orange band around the tree where you set up to call. Turkeys can see color, but any kind of movement will alert them.
- Place your turkey decoys in an orange bag or stuff them in your hunting vest where they cannot be seen while you are transporting them into and out of the woods. If you are fortunate enough to harvest a wild turkey, cover the bird in an orange bag.
- If you use turkey decoys, do not place them where you may be in the potential line of fire of another hunter. When you retrieve your decoys, you should first scan the surrounding area extremely well to make sure that another hunter is not stalking the decoys.
- Hunt defensively and never assume that you are the only people hunting in your area even if the property is “Posted”. Whenever you hear turkey sounds in the woods, you should always assume that those sounds are being made by another hunter until you can positively identify the turkey sounds as that of a legal wild turkey. “Never shoot at sound or movement”.

- Don't ever use the sound of a gobbling turkey. You could get stalked.
- Don't stalk a turkey, but instead call it to you. Calling the turkey to you is what makes our sport so rewarding. Stalking is seldom successful and leads to hunting incidents. A turkey's eyesight and hearing is 8-10 times better than ours. Therefore, you will not be successful stalking, and the sound that you are stalking might just be another hunter. Respect the other hunter. "Don't cut in" on areas where other hunters are working birds, and you should never get between another hunter and a turkey.
- If another hunter does approach your position, remain still and call out in a clear loud voice. Do not wave, sound your turkey call, or whistle to get another hunter's attention.
- Sit with your back against a tree or rock that is as wide as your shoulders and taller than your head. Don't hide where your view will be obstructed.
- Don't wear the colors red, white, blue or black on any part of your body that might be exposed.
- Obey and support all wildlife laws and report all violations.

In closing, I send my heartfelt thanks to my family, Officer George Steele, all the employees and volunteer hunter education instructors associated with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, my friends in the State Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, and to everyone who has helped me to once again enjoy God's great outdoors.