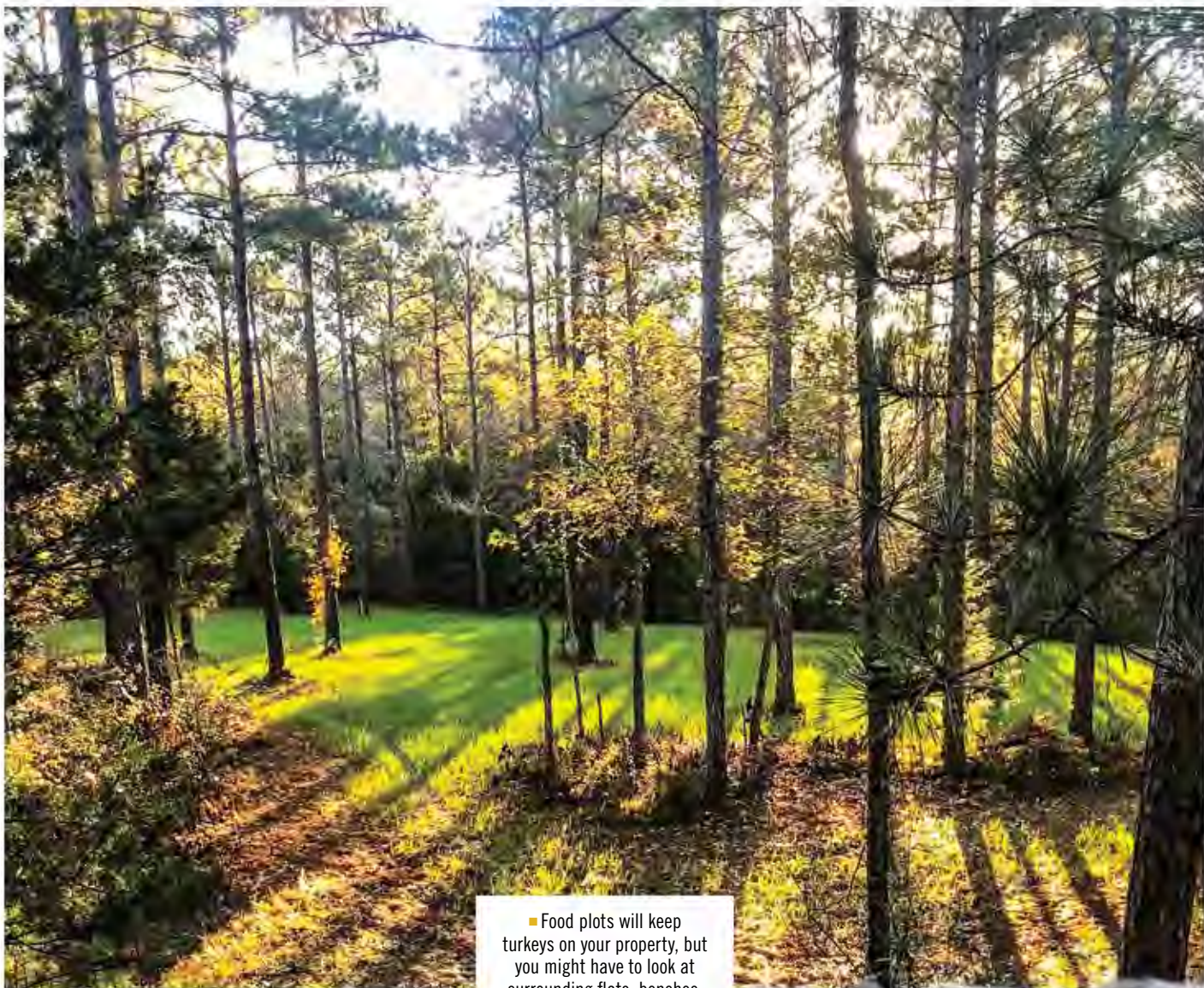




PERIMETER PLOT GOBBLERS

Use food plots for turkey hunting without
killing that longbeard on the plot.

■ by *Darron McDougal*



■ Food plots will keep turkeys on your property, but you might have to look at surrounding flats, benches, ridges and other areas when hoping to tag a gobbler.

Day after day, Wade Atchley sat at his food plot, watching hens and jakes come to feed. The gobbler, however, hung up in the timber off the plot. For eight consecutive mornings, the vicious cycle continued. Atchley flirted with insanity. He did the same thing daily expecting a different result. If he continued to hunt the plot, the gobbler would eventually slip up, right?

“There were times when the hens would leave the plot in the opposite direction,” Atchley said. “Instead of walking through the plot to join them, the tom would circle around through the woods, cut down through a branch hollow and then re-join the hens. He absolutely wouldn’t use the field. He obviously could monitor the hens from the security of the woods, and that’s all he wanted to do.”

On the ninth morning, however, Atchley decided he’d had enough.

“I set up on the oak flat that the tom had been strutting on daily,” he said. “The flock was roosted about 200 yards uphill from me on a ridge. The hens flew down, went through a branch hollow, and then made their way to the plot as usual. I figured he’d follow them, so I got up and moved to the branch hollow. He gobbled and gobbled from the woods as he worked

toward the food plot. So, I cut the edge of the field and went right to where he’d been the previous

days. I sat against a big oak tree and shot him at 20 yards. He was going to do exactly the same thing he’d done the other days, but I changed my tactic and killed him.”

It’s a food-plotter’s dream to watch a gobbler strut through a carpet of lush Imperial Whitetail Clover right down the gun barrel. But it doesn’t always work that way. When a longbeard seems to avoid your plot, don’t look for another bird. Instead, assess the tom’s tendencies, and then consider land features around your plot to peg a new ambush.

Here are several considerations for using food plots for turkey hunting without killing your bird on the plot itself.

ATTRACT THE HENS

Food plots are attractive to turkeys for several reasons. First, the right planting can offer good food for the birds. But turkeys aren’t just after the green stuff. Your Imperial Whitetail Clover plot can be a jungle of insects and worms, and the creepy crawlies become easy targets for birds. If the soil is suitable, turkeys will often take dust baths along the plot edges, too. I’ve seen hens do this many times.

Gobblers might cruise through the plot randomly, but it's common for encounters to play out similarly to Atchley's hunt. If a longbeard can see the plot from the timber without entering it, it might be difficult to call him to the plot and kill him there. But because you've hooked the hens by offering them a place to feed and take dust baths, a gobbler or two will likely occupy the area even if they aren't using the plot. But how do you decide where to set up outside of the plot?

HUNT THE THOROUGHFARES

If your plot has any trails or trail system leading in or out, it can be a great place to decoy a gobbler. Turkeys naturally travel the paths of least resistance, and an ATV trail, logging road or skidder road are valid options. Turkeys usually travel them, and such roads also provide good visibility in a woody setting where gobblers feel more secure.

How far off the plot should you set up on a trail or logging road? I'd suggest not going too far — maybe only 40 yards to



■ Wade Atchley switched tactics to turn the tables on this henned-up Alabama gobbler.

start. Decoy visibility, if you're using decoys, is huge. In a perfect world, your decoy would be visible to gobblers in the plot — if they enter it — and toms that swing

around the field and cross the trail or road.

If you want to pre-scout areas before your hunt, look for tracks in the mud (wetter climates) and strut marks in the sand (drier climates). Those, along with droppings and leaves scratched away, can indicate how regularly turkeys are using the trail or road. Strut marks are my favorite type of sign, because they're evidence that a gobbler was right there. He strutted there once. He'll probably do it again.

Atchley affirmed that roads facilitate turkey traffic.

"A friend of mine cut a road through the woods to use as access to his deer stand," he said. "It turned out that toms preferred to enter the plot on that road. The hens would often fly down into the field or to the field edge, but the toms would fly down, hit that road and then come to the field. Man-made access can improve your food plot for turkey hunting. It gives them better access, but it also gives you more options for hunting off the plot."

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HUNT OAK FLATS, BENCHES AND RIDGES

Is there a ridge or bench below a ridge adjacent to your plot? If so, these areas can be ideal for hunting when you know gobblers are in the area but not frequenting the plot. Although it seems like the plot would be a longbeard's preferred strutting area, he might choose a flat bench or ridge, especially if it's higher than the plot but within view.

"Gobblers where I hunt in the South and also the Midwest notoriously hang up on oak flats," Atchley said. "They love them. If you have an oak flat off your plot, it's a killer spot to set up. Gobblers use them as strut zones. Often, there's good visibility through the timber, so they can see — and be seen — without entering a clearing or field."

HUNT ADJACENT FEEDING AREAS

If you think turkeys only feed in your food plot, think again. There are few periods throughout the day when turkeys aren't feeding. You can do a couple of quick circles through the woods around your plot and look for places with lots

of scratching sign. These are areas where they find bugs, grubs, and leftover acorns.

Atchley also warned to consider reverse circumstances.

"Sometimes, when you go out to hunt in the afternoon, a bird will already be gobbling from the plot," he said. "When you set up and call, he might hang up in the food plot — he wants the hen to come to him. This is where knowing your plot's surroundings is important. My family, friends and I have killed a lot of birds on flats and draws where turkeys continue feeding after they leave the plot. Try to predict where that hung-up bird will go when he leaves the plot, and then circle around to that location. You can try calling to him or simply wait and ambush him."

CREDIT ROLL

It's a given that food plots can hold turkeys in an area, especially Imperial Whitetail Clover or Fusion plots. Most turkey hunters would agree that hunting directly over a food plot is a good start-

ing point. And you might be blessed and kill your gobbler on the first setup in the plot. However, the hunt could easily go the other way. And when it does, you must adapt and hunt some of the critical areas surrounding your plot. Hunt where that gobbler has been hanging up in the woods.

"Hunting key areas around your food plot is a great way to outsmart the older toms in your area who don't want to expose themselves in the open," Atchley said.

By all means, use food plots for turkey hunting, but don't bank on killing birds in them 100 percent of the time. Look beyond your plot for flats, benches, ridges, thoroughfares and forest feeding areas. You're still using the plot to your advantage, but you'll increase your odds of anchoring a clearing-shy older gobbler.

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