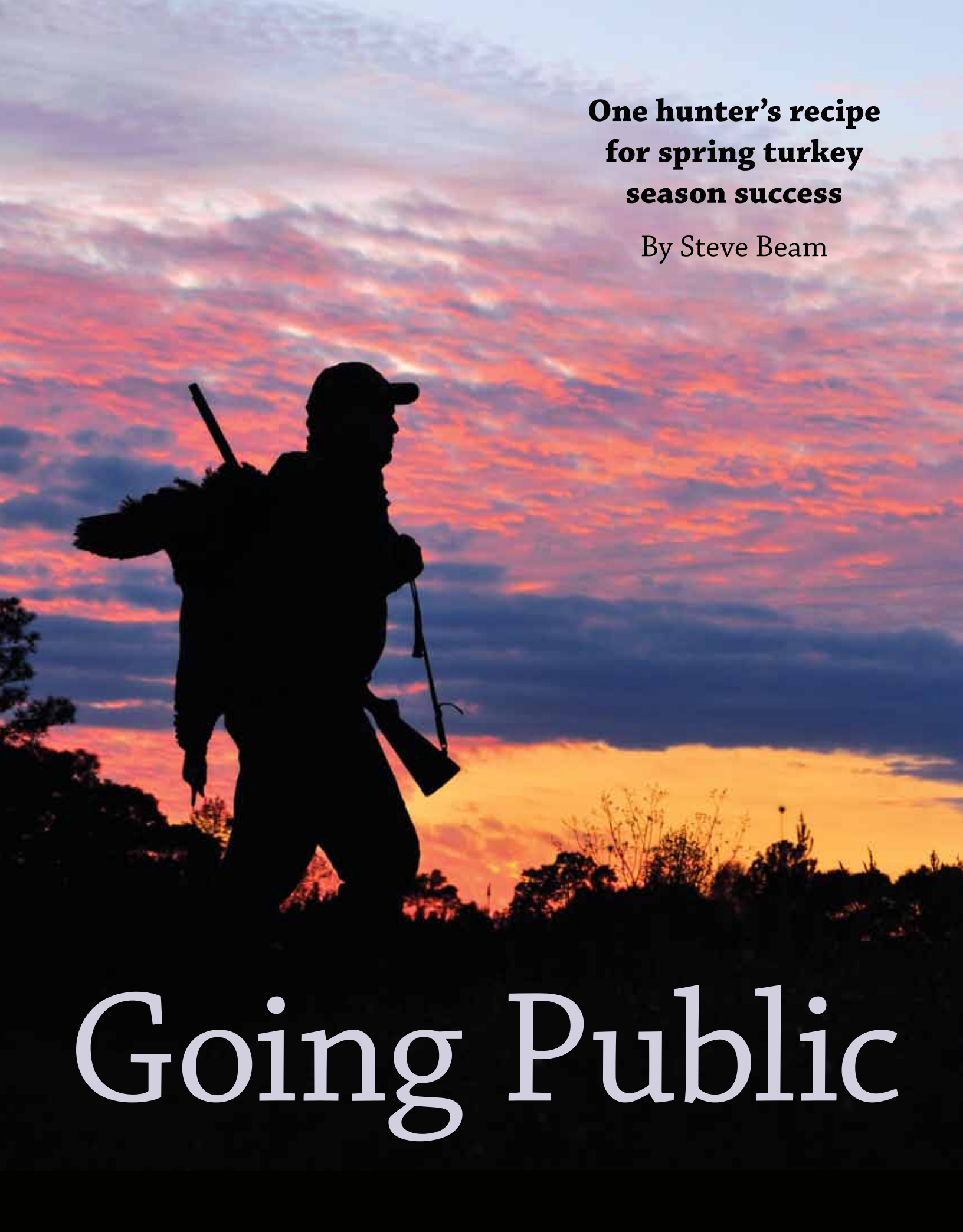


One hunter's recipe for spring turkey season success

By Steve Beam

Going Public

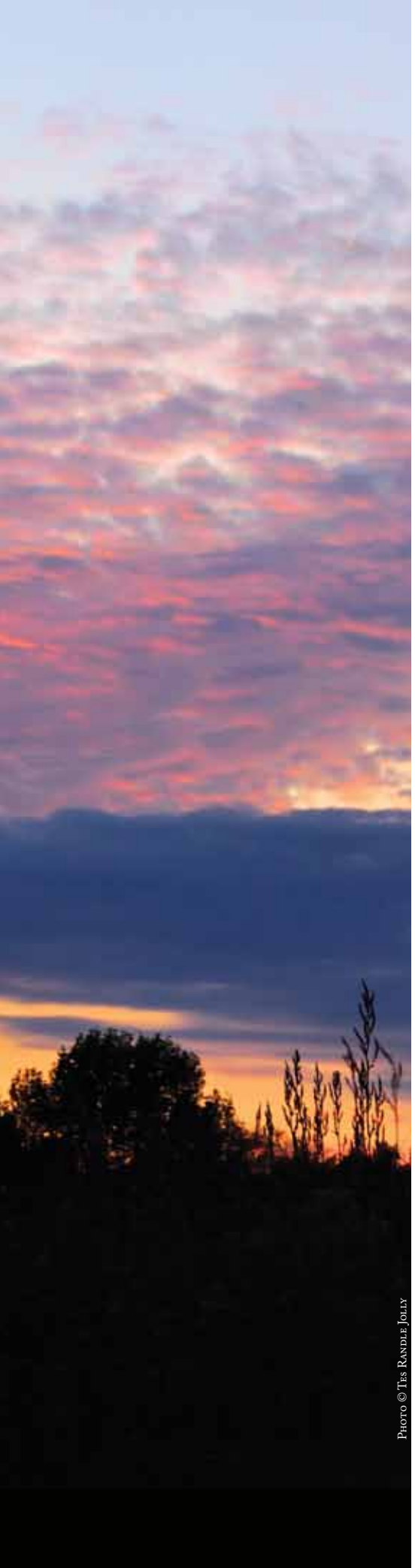


Photo © Tes Randle Jolly

LOTS OF HUNTERS say they don't, or won't, hunt public land.

While I have been fortunate to have access to some really good private ground, I hunt public land part of every season. There is just something I really enjoy about being able to walk and walk and walk. Most of the private land that I have hunted could be covered in a single morning. Not so with public areas.

For most of my adult life, I have lived within an easy drive of the Daniel Boone National Forest. It's a place you can hunt all season and never cover the same real estate twice. Some places are better than others, but I have found turkeys wherever I have gone on the Daniel Boone. I also have had success on the public hunting areas managed by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

It was on public land that I cut my turkey hunting teeth, and where last year I experienced an amazing spring hunt with my dad.

After being pinned down for almost two hours, the gobblers moved across the ridge and it sounded like they were heading off the end of the point. We dashed to the top of the ridge and our only hope was to call them back up the point.

We had experienced an amazing show with an unbelievable amount of gobbling. For reasons known only to them, all the birds had come toward our calling and then gone around us to the top of the ridge. From the sound of things, the boss gobbler and his hens had moved on, but two gobblers remained to strut back and forth above us and gobble and drum incessantly. No amount of coaxing could entice them down to the bench where we were set up.

One of the gobblers did come to 42 yards. Extensive patterning work had proven my shotgun capable of the shot, but the early spring green-up made the woods just too thick. Shooting at a patterning board in the wide-open and at a turkey in the woods are two different things.

We hastily created a new setup overlooking a small pine flat. A gobble followed my first series of yelps, and when I cut back in response, both gobblers let loose. I yelped softly again a couple of minutes later and the response sounded closer. The birds gobbled on their own moments later, and there was no doubt. They were coming! My dad was sitting

Steve Beam photo

to my left. "Get ready," I whispered to him.

It was mere seconds before a blazing red head appeared from behind a tree almost in range. Soon, a second head appeared – blue capped with white. In the slight shadow of the pines, it glowed. I never cease to be amazed at how bright an excited gobbler's head appears in the spring woods. Both birds were coming closer, one strutting and the other watching. When they were well within easy shooting range, dad took the first one. The second bird was temporarily confused and that gave me time to complete the double.

I've lost count of the turkeys that my dad and I have taken while hunting together. We doubled on jakes once and hens one fall, but this was a first for us with longbeards. As we sat there admiring our birds, I thought about how two gobblers willing to gobble and strut for two hours but not come to our locations came straight to the call in a matter of minutes when we found a place where they wanted to be.

During the hour-long, cross-country walk back to the truck, I reflected on our good fortune. This made three birds for the season from this small, tucked away corner of the same wildlife management area. Anyone with a license, a turkey permit and the willingness to walk could hunt this same spot.

When looking for a piece of public land I prefer:

• Places far off the beaten path: Those that if you leave your vehicle and walk an hour in the dark, you leave most people behind you. There are lots of ambitious turkey hunters, and there's always a chance you might run into someone 2 miles from a parking lot, but there are certainly fewer hunters than near roads.

• Overlooked spots: This may be the first U.S. Forest Service gate that you come

to after you leave a main road, or a non-descript old logging road that provides a quiet walk out a long ridge. It could also be a place where you have to work to get across a creek.

• Small tracts of public land near larger blocks: I occasionally hunt a small tract of the Daniel Boone National Forest that is near thousands and thousands of other U.S. Forest Service acres. Few people will hit the small area; most just drive on to the bigger tract of ground.

• A roadless area: I think these are the absolute best places. If you walk an hour, you cut out lots of other hunters. If you walk all or part of that distance off a road or trail, you cut out most everyone.

The key to public land success is scouting. Spend as much time as you can listening and hiking in your hunting areas before the season. Hearing birds gobble in the morning and figuring out where they go after flying down will put lots of birds in the bag come opening weekend. You really can't know too much about your turkeys.

I know a few people who hunt the Daniel Boone National Forest almost exclusively. Because of where they live and work, they can stop and listen at key spots on their way to work each morning. They do this almost daily for two or three weeks before the season and have lots of birds located by opening week.

Finding multiple birds or locations is important. No matter how early you get up, you might arrive at that wildlife management area (WMA) parking lot or forest service gate and find someone already there. It's important to be able to go to your second or third spot.

With areas far from the pavement, you may not be able to hear birds gobbling from the road, so scouting and looking for sign is critical.

The spot where my dad and I had success last year is a place I can't listen to from the road. I walked through the area before the season and the amount of scratching and feeding sign alone told me that it was holding lots of birds. I also look for strut marks in old dirt roads or dusting areas. These are good indicators of where birds loaf in the midmorning or afternoon hours.

Hearing turkeys gobble, listening to the spring woods wake up, looking for mushrooms and enjoying wildflowers is not a bad way to spend a few spring mornings even if you aren't carrying a shotgun and hunting a gobbler.

Because lots of other people are out scouting and enjoying the spring woods, it is a good time to scout other hunters, too. Is there a forest service gate that always has someone parked there on Saturday mornings before the season? You can bet someone will be there on opening day.

Take the time to find a place where the turkeys are and the people aren't.

An important part of hunting public land is understanding others have just as much of a right to spot as you. When you make it to your pull-off in the morning it might be frustrating that someone is already there and hiking out "your ridge" to hunt the

Obie Williams photo

Safety on Public Land

Keep your public land hunt a safe one with these basic tips: Sit with your back against a tree at least as wide as your shoulders, and make sure you can see at least 80 yards past your decoys. Don't wear any red, blue or white, or carry any soft drinks or snacks with these colors. Consider taking along a spare blaze orange cap – and wear it if you're carrying out a turkey or leaving the field for the day.

Photo courtesy Steve Beam

Steve Beam photo

Left: Wildlife Director Steve Beam and his father, Steve Beam Sr., found success while turkey hunting public land last year.

turkey you so carefully scouted.

This is a case where the golden rule goes a long way. The best thing to do is to move on to one of your back-up spots.

On the hunt mentioned earlier, we arrived at the WMA parking lot at the same time as another hunter. There are plenty of places to access from that parking area, so I went up to him and asked which direction he was planning to strike out. He was already planning to go in the opposite direction from where I wanted to go.

I knew the area well enough that if he had been heading that way, I would have happily gone the other direction. I had been on birds in previous springs where he was planning to go.

Occasionally, public land hunters go after the same bird and mess each other up. If this happens to you, just take it in stride and move on. It may be hard to believe, but I have actually been foiled by other hunters more often on private property over the years than on public land. Part of this is because I don't always have exclusive access on farms that I hunt and because of a few disrespectful trespassers.

If you happen upon a hunter in the woods, safely get his or her attention. If you are both walking, enjoy meeting another like-minded individual. Or, if the hunter is set up on a bird, respectfully head out and find another one. That is the safe thing to do, and the right thing to do.

Another excellent strategy for public land hunting is to choose off-peak times. Did you hunt grandma's small farm on opening weekend and shoot the only gobbler you heard on the place? Then stretch your legs on some public land later in the week. Do you have the flexibility to hunt mornings during the middle of the week? There will be fewer hunters out on public areas at that time.

Remember that forest service spot where someone always seems to be hunting in the mornings? Well, the gobblers are still there in the afternoon, and if you hit it right, an evening hunt can be just as exciting as a morning hunt. Do you only have one week of vacation? Consider taking off the second week instead of the first.

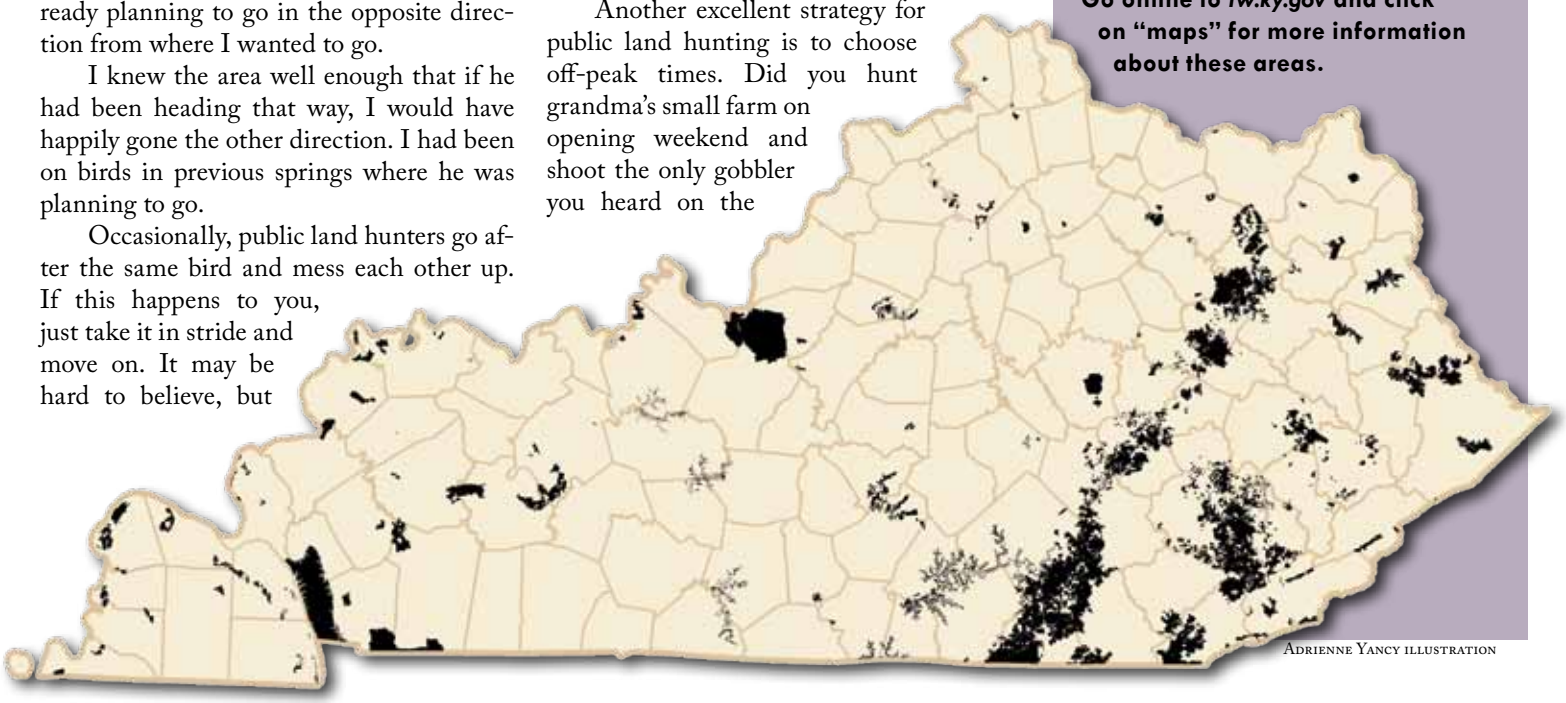
While I love hunting the first weeks, I've found that hunting later in the season can be just as good – because more hens are on the nest.

I have been fortunate to live within driving distance of thousands of acres of public hunting areas. If you are in a part of the state where such expansive public land doesn't exist, consider making a trip.

Take the family for a camping trip while the kids are on spring break and get up each morning and scout a likely turkey hunting spot. Then, come back during turkey season and give those places a try. Who knows? The family may want to come back with you. ■

Public Hunting Areas in Kentucky

Kentucky has thousands of acres of public land available for hunting. Go online to *fw.ky.gov* and click on "maps" for more information about these areas.



Adrienne Yancy illustration