

Featured Content

Plan to Roost

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Experts discuss the nuances of roost hunting and setups.

Dusk. Standing on a logging road, listening and hoping. Bam, a triple gobble from the roost. Game on.

Hunting roost sites is exciting, but rarely that easy. In fact, successful and sustainable roost hunting requires a well-thought-out plan. When four turkey hunting experts speak with one voice on how to hunt roost sites effectively, we should pay attention.

Four of the nation's most successful turkey hunting guides – Hoke Granger, Alabama; Jacob Kelley, Florida; Parker Allen, Alabama; and Kaleb Pressler, Nebraska – say the five keys to roost hunting are: 1) knowing the terrain, 2) patterning bird behavior, 3) being stealthy, 4) setting up strategically, and 5) using a controlled calling plan.

Balance Risk and Reward

Roost hunting's reward — quickly engaging a gobbler — carries the risk of bumping and educating birds, and interrupting roosting patterns. Keeping roost sites sustainable is paramount.

Granger learned this on an evening roost hunt as a kid. He watched his mentor Larry Athey aim at a gobbler Granger had called in. The bird was in perfect range. But no shot rang out. All Granger saw was Athey mouth, "Boom," as the gobbler walked off and flew up to roost.

"I was stunned, confused," Granger said. "But what Mr. Larry said next changed my life. He said, 'Son, he gobbled real good ... but if we shoot him today, he won't gobble tomorrow.' In an instant, he showed me the value of roost sites."

Kelley's strategy balances immediate success with sustainability. "We hunt roost sites for efficiency, aiming to harvest a bird quickly without disrupting future hunts," he said. "I hunt the roost area, not specific trees. Overhunting trees can blow out a spot, especially in the West, where trees are scarce."

Restraint maintains viability. "If I'm guiding and we identify three or four toms in a tree, I'm not going to hunt the roost that morning and educate three toms to take one," Pressler adds.

Roost sites don't guarantee success, but they offer an edge. The hardest part is knowing when to sit silently or back out because the risk outweighs the reward.

Master Terrain Knowledge

Understanding terrain is critical to locating roosts, planning setups, and leaving the woods undetected.

"You must know the land," Pressler says. Whether it's river bottoms in South Dakota or Alabama's hardwoods, knowing ridges, bottoms and fields helps guide stealthy approaches.

A small creek or fence can stop a hot bird. Nearby fields often attract roosted toms. Not knowing those features puts you at a disadvantage.

"Knowing the woods is foremost," Kelley adds. Boots-on-the-ground scouting — walking terrain, identifying sign and observing birds — is irreplaceable. Still, mobile apps like onX help mark locations, take notes, and check distances and property lines.

Pattern Bird Behavior

Patterning bird activity help gather info needed to position in high-success areas throughout the day. Focus on the birds' needs: breeding, food, water and security.

"I hunt the same land every day of the season," Allen said. "Knowing bird patterns allows flexibility. If a tom slips by us, we can return later when he returns to roost."

"We all think of roost hunting as moving in before daylight, hoping a bird flies down and runs to you," Pressler adds. "But best-laid plans often fail. I've killed most of my birds between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., when hens leave, toms are still looking for love and most hunters have left the woods." That may not sound like roost hunting, but it is. All hunts begin and end at the roost.

Practice Stealth to Avoid Bumping

In roost hunting, bumping the bird is a critical mistake. Stealth prevents spooking birds, which can disrupt patterns for weeks. All four experts prioritize silence and deliberate movement. Approach roosts at safe distances (75-300 yards) and use cover like brush or ridges to stay hidden.

Plan your approach before heading out. Use terrain knowledge and tools like onX, aerial photos or maps to identify fly-down fields or feeding areas. Avoid hunting the bird's exact location. Instead, position based on likely fly-down spots or feeding routes. Setting up between the roost and the turkey's next destination improves odds, especially with less vocal birds.

If the morning hunt fails, have a Plan B to observe activity in the roost area later. Move in several hours before dusk, set up and chill. Patience matters. Even if you don't see or engage a bird, you may hear one fly up or gobble, setting up a great morning opportunity.

Use Minimal, Strategic Calling

"Overcalling to roosted birds is one of the biggest mistakes a hunter can make," Kelley said. Aggressive calling too early is unnatural and alerts birds.

"Tailor your calls to group dynamics," Pressler adds. "In the morning, I wait for the bird to gobble before making a sound. Then I respond with soft purrs or yelps to indicate my presence."

"I also use soft tree yelps to gauge the mood," Allen said. "I call sparingly when birds are unresponsive, and slightly more when they're active. But I'm always cautious."

Early and late-season calling should adjust to changing cover and behavior. Sparse early-season foliage exposes movement and lets sound travel. Late-season cover muffles sound and shifts turkey patterns.

No matter the season, all four experts recommend calling conservatively, reading bird behavior and adjusting accordingly.

Adapt to Seasonal Conditions

From opening day to closing, habitat and turkey behavior evolve. Open woods grow dense, and roost patterns shift. Hunters must adapt.

Allen stays 200-300 yards back in early season but closes to 75-100 yards in dense late-season cover.

Pressler says birds in his region go quiet in late season, requiring bolder calls. "You've got to get in their face sometimes," he said.

Kelley notes late-season toms are spooky. “They stick to isolated roosts and are incredibly wary. You’ve got to be ghost quiet.”

Toms may even regroup late, complicating patterning further.

The bottom line of roost hunting? It requires a nuanced understanding of calling, site selection, and strategic planning, as demonstrated by Allen, Granger, Pressler and Kelley. Their insights, grounded in diverse regional experiences, highlight the importance of terrain mastery, cautious communication and adaptive tactics. By integrating these principles, hunters can enhance their success while respecting the intricate behavior of wild turkeys.

Our Experts

Parker Allen is a full-time guide at the famed Bent Creek Lodge in Alabama, co-owned by his father Leo Allen and John Lanier. Hunting since age three, he harvested his first turkey at seven and began guiding in 2018.

Hoke Granger, from Dothan, Alabama, is an athlete, musician and hunting and fishing guide with a unique East-West perspective. He guides in the Southeast as well as Nebraska (The Roost Lodge) and Montana.

Kaleb Pressler, a native of Colorado, started guiding right out of high school. He guides turkey hunts in multiple states.

Jacob Kelley has been turkey hunting for over 30 years and guiding for 20-plus years. He is part of a team that manages privately owned land in northeast Florida for wildlife, timber and cattle.