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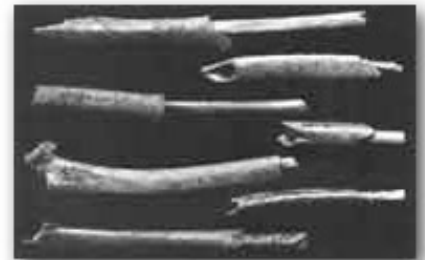
Wing Bone Turkey Calls

The Indian of the Southern United States was a master of his environment. "Waste not, want not," was his unspoken philosophy. His continued existence depended upon a keen eye to the ebb and flow of the world around him. Everything he gathered or killed had a use and a purpose; whether it was a deer, turkey, bear or a medicinal plant, he knew that his very life hung on that narrow thread of making the most out of every part of the animal or plant he was utilizing. The white tailed deer which fell to his atlatl or bow fed and clothed his family and provided the materials needed to produce the weapon with which to kill the next deer. Dogbane provided him with the cordage he needed for his bowstring, traps, snares and nets while the plant kingdom filled the empty bellies of his wife and child. By necessity, early man became the ultimate recycler, wasting nothing.

The same philosophy held true for the wild turkey common in the heavily forested hills and grassy plains of this region he called home. More than just a food source, it's feathers fletched his arrows, it's spurs used as projectile points and the quills used to decorate pottery. More importantly, it's very bones could be used to fashion a call for luring in other turkeys within arrow range.

In 1940, in what was to become Kentucky Lake in western Tennessee, archaeologists began excavating a massive Indian village which came to be known as the Eva site. Among the thousands of projectile points and pottery shards was a large amount of wild turkey bones which had obviously been cut and ground so as to fit together. These calls made from the radius and ulna were eventually dated back 6500 years.

Identical to modern calls of today, these calls from the Eva site gave modern hunter a glimpse into a hunting technique which has remained largely unchanged until now. With a little elbow grease, you too can make a wingbone call similar to the ones discovered at the Eva site.



Processing the Bones

The first challenge in making a turkey wingbone call is to get some bones from hunters or at your local store around Thanksgiving and Christmas. Contrary to a popular misconception, domestic turkey bones, while not quite as strong as those of the wild turkey, are not too fragile to use and can make some pretty good calls. In a pinch or if you prefer, you can use bones from other birds such as a large chicken, duck or goose. All will make an acceptable sound. If you do choose to use bones from local wild Turkeys, be sure to check into the legalities of using hen versus Tom. Turkey bones. In Alabama, it is illegal to kill a hen turkey.

Once you have located a suitable turkey, pull the feathers off and carefully separate the large bones at the joints. Try not to jerk and overly manipulate the bones at this point. They are fragile and easily snapped.

Once the bones have been removed, pull off as much fat and gristle as possible. Place a large handful of wood ashes and sand in a pot of hot water and use this to occasionally rinse the bones while working on them. This helps to remove a lot of the grease from the bones making cleaning a much easier process. If you don't want to mess with the ashes, you can simply use very hot water and constantly swish the bones in it.

When the bones have been thoroughly washed and the gristle from the end removed, turn your attention to the marrow and small bone like partitions inside the bone. If you wish, you can remove the solid ends of each bone at this point. Take a bone awl and use it as a scraper/punch to gouge out a lot of the adhering marrow as well as breaking out the small pieces of bone like material. Your goal here is to completely clean the interior of the bone. The cleaner the interior, the better the quality of sound from the finished product. One word of

caution - It is very easy to split the bone at this point so use your bone awl very carefully.

My preference is to use a bone awl for the wider parts and switch to a thin rivercane shoot and wet sand to finish reaming out the bone removing as much of the marrow as possible. . At the same time occasionally blowing through the bone forces out tiny bits of marrow the awl or rivercane shoot has missed.

Next, repeat the cleaning process. You want to get absolutely all of the marrow and other gunk out of the bones in order to have a better, more clear sound.

After cleaning the bones, locate an ant hill. Here in the South we have no problem finding a nice fire ant mound for this part. A few days being worked over by these industrious insects should be more than enough to remove any final stubborn particles you may have missed. Be very cautious when using the anthill method to place a wire cage or slotted milk crate over the bones. If you forget to do this someone will walk off during the night with all of your hard work.

If you don't have access to a suitable anthill you can simply simmer the bones on the stove in water in which a squirt or two of Dawn dishwashing liquid has been added. Nothing beats Dawn for breaking up grease and cleaning the bones.

The final stage in preparing the bones is to lay them out in a sunny spot for a few days to bleach white. Again, if you choose you can soak the bones in hydrogen peroxide for several hours. This will whiten them to your satisfaction. Now if you choose you can do some more scraping and wet sanding the bones with a piece of sand stone. This is not necessary but serves to smooth and whiten the bones even further. Bees wax can be rubbed in to add luster and act as a moisturizer thus lengthening the life of the call.

At this point you are ready to begin the actual process of constructing the wingbone call.

Making The Call

The actual construction of a wingbone call is a fairly easy process. All you need is a basic understanding of turkey anatomy and you are ready to begin.

Think of a turkey wing as being equal to the human arm. It has a radius, ulna and humerus just as we do. It is these three bones you will use to construct the call. The radius is the small bone, the ulna, the middle sized bone with the humerus being the largest bone.

Remove the ends of each bone section. This can be done with a piece of flint if you are going primitive or with a small saw otherwise.

Place the large end of the radius into the small end of the ulna and the large end of the ulna into the small end of the humerus. You will probably have to do a bit of trimming at this point to get everything to fit properly but it won't take much. These bones just seem to be made for each other. The ulna is usually the only bone which needs much abrading and this can be done with a piece of sandstone or sandpaper.



When you can fit the bones into each other to your satisfaction, being careful to keep them aligned along their curve, take some pine resin and smear the bones above and below each joint. Don't forget to fill in any gaps you find, particularly around where the ulna and humerus join.

Next, begin twisting and wrapping your cordage around the bone. Pull the cordage tight while spiraling upwards. You can either wrap all the way up the bone covering both sets of joints or you may want to wrap the bone below and above the first joint, leave a gap and do the same with the second joint. I personally tend to do this since I think this is a bit more eye appealing. This gap can also be decorated or used as a point of attachment for a carrying thong.

Once the call has been completely wrapped, again smear pine resin over the cordage. Lastly, take a burning ember from the fire you started earlier with a hand drill and melt the pine resin. With your fingers, rub the hot resin thoroughly into the wrapping. When this cools, your wingbone call will be bound tightly together as well as waterproofed.

There is a wide variety of native materials to choose from for wrapping the bone. I tend to use Dogbane (Indian Hemp), Milkweed and

Palm fibers. You can also use thin strips of deer rawhide.

If you want to use a carrying thong, cut off a small round piece of the radius and slip it like a collar the call. A small buckskin thong can be used as a carrying strap.

How to Sound Like a Real Turkey

So, you managed to make yourself an authentic Southeastern wingbone turkey call. Now all you have to do is figure out how to blow the danged thing.

Actually, managing to pass yourself off as hen or tom turkey really isn't all that difficult. A little attention to detail and a lot of practice will have you clucking like a pro in no time at all.

Grasp the call on its lower end in the fleshy area between your thumb and index finger. This will allow your ring and pinky fingers to fall naturally across the mouth of the call. Use your left hand to help support and steady the call.

Place your lips just over the mouthpiece and begin to suck (not blow) air as if you were making kissing noises with your lips. By varying the position of your fingers over the mouth of call you can adjust both the volume and tone of the sound. There are other methods used for carrying and blowing the call but this is the method I find the easiest to learn.

With just a little practice you will soon find yourself yelping and gobbling like a real turkey! The great thing about these calls is that they can be used not only for turkeys but also as a predator call and for Javelina out West. The small radius bone can be used by itself as a mouse squeaker for coyote and fox.

It is very important to remember that the tone and volume of a wingbone call is influenced by both the number of bones you use as well as how far the bones are inserted into each other. It is always a good idea to experiment for the best sound before gluing all of the bones together. A call made from the humerus or femur will make a louder sound with a deeper pitch.

Turkey hunters with a preference usually choose between a two and three bone call. Two bone and short three bone calls sounding more like a hen turkey while the larger three bone calls will mimic those large toms you are after.



Making a wingbone turkey call is a great project for the primitive skills enthusiast as well as the seasoned hunter. They are relatively easy to make with stone tools and, with practice, simple to use. Standing behind a blind in the deep woods, blowing on a handmade call brings us a step closer to the ancestral hunter

patiently waiting for nature to feed his family and then provide the tools to continue the cycle of hunting and gathering.

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