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Grand Slam Birds - Which Subspecies is the Hardest?

By **Toxie Givens**

So I got your attention with my snappy title. Any successful turkey hunter who has gone after the Grand Slam has an opinion as to which subspecies is the hardest. My opinion is that they are all hard but each in their own different ways. Notice I said they were all hard but I did not specify which one was the hardest. I am sure if I sat down with other avid turkey hunters we would have some great discussions on this topic but since I need to write this article I am going to build my case for each one and then rank them at the end.

I currently lease properties that allow me to hunt three of the subspecies every year in Florida (Osceola), Georgia and Mississippi (Eastern), and Texas (Rio Grande). I got two of each bird during my 2009 season. Why do I do it? Because I enjoy the different styles of hunting involved with each subspecies. I have included the National Wildlife Turkey Foundation's (www.nwtf.org) subspecies turkey map so you can visualize where each subspecies is located as I discuss them. The NWTF site has great information about each subspecies for the beginner and besides, they have been and are great stewards of wild turkey.

OSCEOLA

Let's start with the subspecies where the hunting season opens up first, the Osceola. The Osceola is only found in the state of Florida and this starts them off on the difficult scale. The environment in Florida is normally hot in March and April with mosquitoes the size of dinosaurs. Out of state hunters have to find an outfitter, public lands, or a lease in order to hunt them. In my opinion, Osceola are modified Eastern turkeys that have evolved over time. They have longer legs to adapt to the Florida swamps and other terrain. They also have a tendency to not gobble a lot once off the roost. I can remember only a few times where they were fired up and gobbling their heads off for a given period of time. The mornings that I was present during these gobbling sessions, I harvested birds. My hunting style is very similar to how I hunt Easterns but with them not gobbling on the roost it can be difficult and frustrating.

EASTERN

Chances are if you consider yourself a turkey hunter, you hunt Easterns.

They are the most abundant species of the grand slam birds. They are also the hardest in my opinion. Guess I let the cat out of the bag. Oh well. To kill an Eastern bird consistently every year, proves that you are an avid and successful hunter. In my opinion there is no other wariest bird than the Eastern. What do I mean by wary? I think evolution has

caused them to develop this keen sense of danger due to hunting pressure and the fact that they live in populated areas where people are present. Therefore wary to me means a smart bird that is constantly looking out for danger and is always alert. You probably hear the word wary mentioned about whitetail deer.

Turkeys are the same way. The hunting terrain for Easterns is normally not a big factor on how you hunt these birds.

RIO GRANDE

I love hunting Rio Grande turkeys. As I mentioned before, I have a lease in Texas just for hunting them. They are in no way as wary as Eastern or Osceola in my opinion, due to the sparse population in the areas they are found on. The

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first time we got the lease I swore they had never been hunted. My hunting lease is on the Pecos River where the Rocky Mountains start. It is very hilly and rocky with creek bottoms that have open cattle fields. This openness makes it difficult to "Run and Gun" so we hunt out of tents placed strategically along their feeding corridors and roosting trees. Another factor is that Rios cover a lot of ground every day foraging for food. When you see them fly off the roost they are normally going somewhere fast. So, if you do not get them right off the roost they might be a couple miles off your property by noon that day. Another factor is that it is hard to hunt turkeys when you are constantly

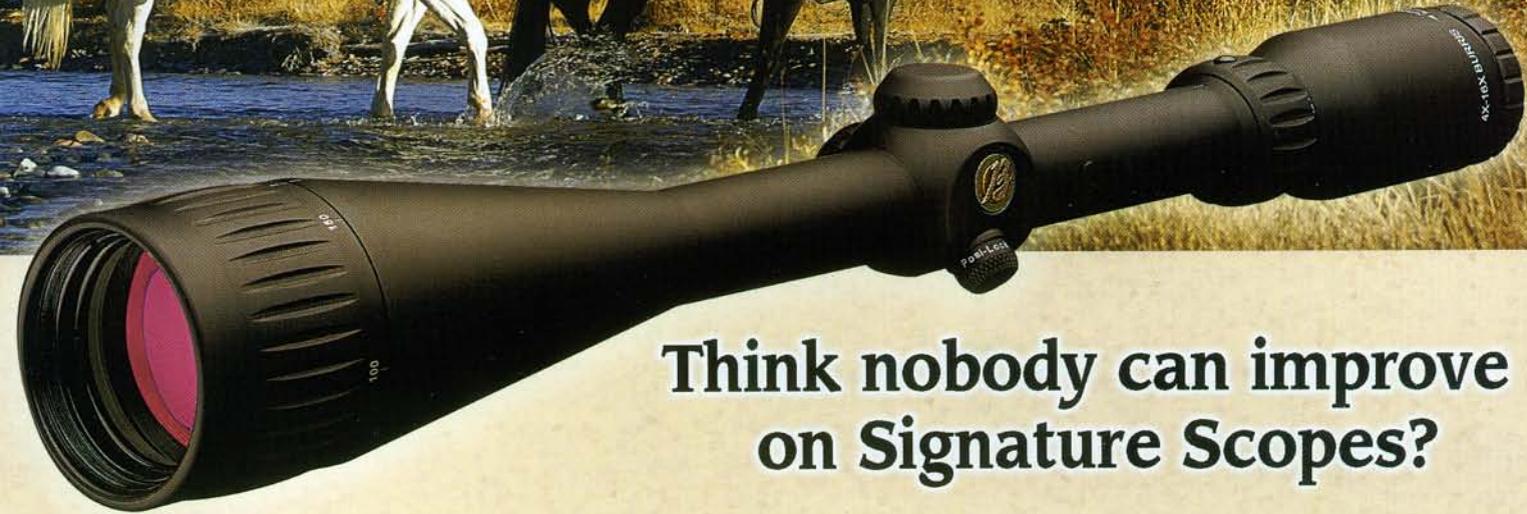
looking for snakes. I know snakes are found everywhere you hunt turkeys but in Texas they grow them bigger. When I refer to them I mean diamondback rattlesnakes. Besides my turkey calls and decoys, my snake boots are my number one hunting accessories when hunting Rios.

MERRIAM

Merriam are a lot like Rios meaning they are less wary due to lack of civilization. I hunted Merriam in the Colorado Mountains and these birds acted like they had never seen a human before. We could drive up on them in trucks and they would stand there



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and look at you. Once you got out of the truck they would run. You let an Eastern or Osceola see a truck or even hear one they will be in the next county before they stop flying. Hunting in the mountains to me was the biggest challenge. I was okay as long as I was going laterally or down the mountains but going up the mountains made me huff and puff like the big bad wolf in the Three Little Pigs story. When turkeys would gobble, I would say let's go for the one down there or over there. It was always hard to say let's go up the mountain to get that one. Better yet let's wait till another one gobbles. If you've ever hunted Merriam in the mountains you know what I'm talking about. The cold temperatures were another factor. Opening day when I was hunting in Colorado was 18 degrees Fahrenheit

with five inches of snow on the ground. I was amazed to watch these beautiful birds gobbling and strutting in the snow.

RANKINGS

Now that I have built a case for each subspecies here is my ranking and a summary of why I put them where I did:

1. Eastern – Very wary birds to hunt due to surrounding population and hunting pressure.
2. Osceola – Less wary as an Eastern but has a tendency not to gobble; therefore, hard to initially set up on. Limited places to hunt.
3. Merriam – Tougher environments to hunt in due to elevated terrain and/or winter hunting conditions.
4. Rio Grande – Wide open country



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with them traveling long distances during the day once off the roost; plus the possibility of rattle snakes.

So basically you can sum up the birds in two types of hunting groups: a wary pressured group consisting of Easterns and Osceolas and the environmentally challenged group; the Rio Grandes and Merriams.

Now that you know my rankings, go over to the HuntX3 forums and post your comments. Please feel free

to disagree with me and voice your opinion. Or better yet, bring up points or experiences that I might have missed. I love a good healthy discussion about turkey hunting – a sport I am very passionate about.

Good luck this spring!

