

Jacob Thompson, Age 17  
Oak Forest Academy

As a new and inspired photographer, I am always looking for my next photo challenge. In my opinion, the toughest photo challenge is wildlife photography. I have learned that photographing animals is harder than hunting them. With photography, there are many more factors that enable someone from getting his or her trophy. I have faced many of these factors as well as the disappointments that follow, but I am stubborn about it. I know that if I keep trying, I will eventually achieve success. Until then, all I can do is learn from my mistakes, and laugh at some of my unfortunate circumstances.

One of my greatest challenges occurred during the '09 turkey season. I wanted to capture a photo of a gobbler in full strut. The problem was that there were no turkeys on my family's property, or on the hunting clubs that we leased. My dad had heard of a dairy farmer who had turkeys on his property. The man did not let people hunt on his place, but I was confident he would let me photograph. With a flat of strawberries as an extra incentive, my dad and I visited him and received his permission to photograph turkeys on his land. The following week I arrived at the dairy barn dressed in full camouflage, and with me was my camera and a goal set in mind.

From the barn, I walked a half mile until I reached the back of the pasture, where a tree line separated the field and a creek. This was when reality struck me. I thought to myself, "I know very little about turkeys, and I know even less about the property I am on. How am I supposed to get close enough to take pictures of turkeys?" As I pondered that question, I walked the edge of the field, staying close to the tree line for cover. I had walked only for a few minutes when I saw a baby calf lying in the tall grass. I took a few steps toward it, because I could not

tell if it was dead or alive. I found out that the calf was very much alive, because as soon as I got close to it, it jumped up, ran, and never looked back. The field did not have any other cows in it, so I knew it shouldn't have been there. I decided to walk back to the barn and tell the farmer about the calf.

When I told the farmer about the calf, we got in his truck and drove to the back of the pasture. While we were looking for the calf, we saw four turkeys, two hens, a jake, and a gobbler. They were feeding in the field about three hundred yards from us. The farmer told me to forget about the calf, and try to get some pictures. I stepped out of the truck, and began observing the turkeys. As I put on my mask and gloves, I started to figure out what I needed to do. The turkeys were picking through the grass, and slowly walking toward me. I planned my route from cover to cover, and then began my long approach.

Once I was close enough, I sat down behind a small briar patch near the tree line, and slowly positioned myself. After I was settled, I looked up and saw the hens and the young jake, but I didn't see the gobbler. A few minutes passed by, but still no gobbler. Then, I heard something rustle in the tall grass to my left. I assumed it was only a field rat. I had no idea what was in store for me.

Springing out from the tops of the grasses, like a jack-in-the-box, was the gobbler's bright red head. He was looking directly at me and was only a mere fifteen feet away. I did not dare to move. He stepped into an opening, and I was awestruck but heartbroken at the sight of the old tom's beard. It was at least nine inches long, maybe longer, and I was wishing I had my shotgun with me instead of my camera. The gobbler cautiously walked around me. His beady, black eyes never broke from me for more than a second. He knew something was not right, and

he was nervous. He soon turned around and started walking back from the way he had come, and the other turkeys followed him.

I was not ready to give up yet. I crawled fast and carefully as I tried to keep up with the flock. After a while of crawling, I heard something behind me. I turned around, and to my surprise, it was the baby calf which I had seen earlier. I ignored it and continued to follow the turkeys, but the calf continued to follow me. I was worried that the calf would enable me from getting close to the turkeys. I had to somehow lose the calf. I laid there wondering what I could do when I saw the perfect opportunity. The creek had a large bend in it. I could go down the creek bank and into the water, and then walk a few yards downstream and I would be in front of the turkeys. I considered my plan to be fool proof.

I took my boots and socks off as fast as I could, and left them and the calf behind on the creek bank. I scaled the bank until I planted my feet on a log, and then I slowly slid down into the frigid water. Quietly, I walked downstream with my camera over my head, and then I crawled up a sand bank. When I looked over the levee, I was shocked at what I saw. The turkeys were exactly where I wanted them, but running towards them was the baby calf. I watched in disappointment as the calf chased the birds away, and also ruined my chance of capturing a photo of an incredible gobbler.