HUNTING WILD TURKEYS WITH NONLEAD AMMO

by Ed Migale

A new era began in California's turkey woods with the opening of the 2017 spring turkey hunting season. As of July 1, 2016, California turkey hunters are required by law to use nonlead ammunition statewide on both public and private lands.

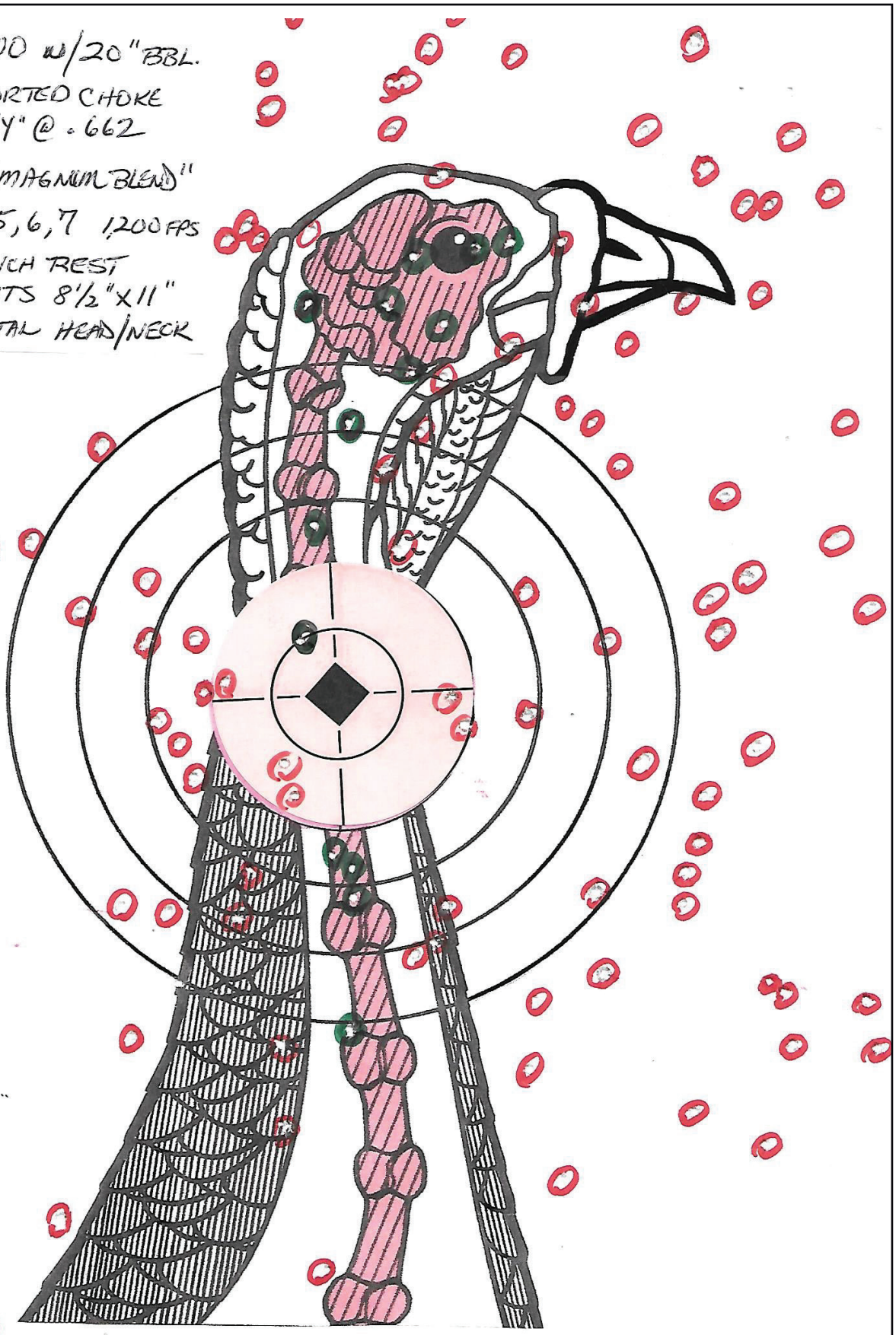
The bad news for hunters is the price for nonlead purpose-specific turkey ammunition is significantly more expensive than its lead-based counterparts.

The good news for hunters is turkey hunting is nothing like duck or dove hunting, where boxes and boxes of shells are fired in a season. In spring turkey hunting, an outstanding season – the stuff of wonderful memories – would require all of three shots. That and a few shots at the patterning board shouldn't break anyone's bank – not when you compare the price of a few rounds of ammo with the cost of filling up the truck with gasoline.

Even better news for hunters is that all-tungsten turkey ammo outperforms comparable lead loads by a wide margin. Pattern testing I've done resulted in tungsten loads putting twice the number of pellets in a turkey target's vital head/neck area at 40 yards versus high quality nickel plated lead loads. And because it is heavier than lead, tungsten shot carries more energy to target. For these reasons, some savvy turkey hunters have voluntarily used these tungsten turkey loads for years, despite the high price.

12GA. REM. 1100 w/20" BBL.
HEVI-SHOT PORTED CHOKE TUBE "TKY" @ .662

HEVI-SHOT "MAGNUM BLEND"
3" 2oz. #'s 5,6,7 1,200 FPS
40 YDS - BENCH REST
131 TOTAL HITS 8½"x11"
14 HITS IN VITAL HEAD/NECK



At present, there are two companies manufacturing purpose-specific nonlead turkey ammunition: Federal Premium® Ammunition with its Mag-Shok® Heavyweight® Turkey products, and Environ-Metal, Inc., producers of HEVI-Shot® with turkey ammunition marketed under the HEVI-13®, Magnum Blend™, and HEVI-Metal® Turkey product lines. Both companies produce offerings in 10, 12 and 20 gauges, with products in 3 1/2", 3" and 2 3/4" length shells, and in full magnum payloads as well as reduced recoil options. Yes, there are lots to choose from!

It is important to consider that your gun and its choke is its own entity and could produce patterns that are very different than your buddy's gun/choke with the same load. Therefore, it is a really good idea to invest in several different types of ammo and spend some time at the patterning board. Costs can be offset by doing this with a few friends.

My sources at Federal told me their best option is to go with their #7 Heavyweight shot as this size produces very dense patterns while retaining plenty of energy out to 40 yards and beyond. I haven't tried the #7's yet, but did kill a huge gobbler with their #6's.

Another special consideration: Federal turkey ammo is all loaded with their unique Flitecontrol® wad which does not function correctly when fired through a ported choke tube. To get good patterns with this ammo you need a non-vented choke tube.

HEVI-Shot's Magnum Blend layers three sizes of shot – #5, 6 and 7 or #4, 5 and 7 in 12 gauge and #5, 6 and 7 in 20 gauge – in the same shell while their HEVI-13 loads come in one size of shot per shell with sizes 4, 5, 6 and 7 available. I got excellent patterns with both of these loads using HEVI-Shot's HEVI-CHOKE choke tube which they make for dozens of different models of shotguns.

HEVI-Shot also makes a line of ammo called HEVI-Metal Turkey which has #6 HEVI-Shot pellets layered atop #4 steel pellets in the same shell. At about $2.50 per shell, cost is considerably less than all-tungsten equivalents. The patterns I got in 12 and 20 gauge were solidly lethal at 25 yards, but were a bit thin at 40. If you go with this less expensive option, keep your shots to 35 yards or less.

With high-quality lead alternatives such as those mentioned above, the future of turkey hunting in California remains as bright as the green spring woods themselves. It may cost us a bit more money every time we pull the trigger, but the results – if you make the effort to pattern your gun prior to hunting with this "new" ammo – will be excellent.

Ed Migale has hunted turkeys for 25 years throughout California, eight other U.S. states and Mexico. Ed is one of the few hunters to have completed turkey hunting's Royal Slam – the taking of all five subspecies of wild turkeys found in North America. He was inducted into the California Outdoors Hall of Fame in 2013.