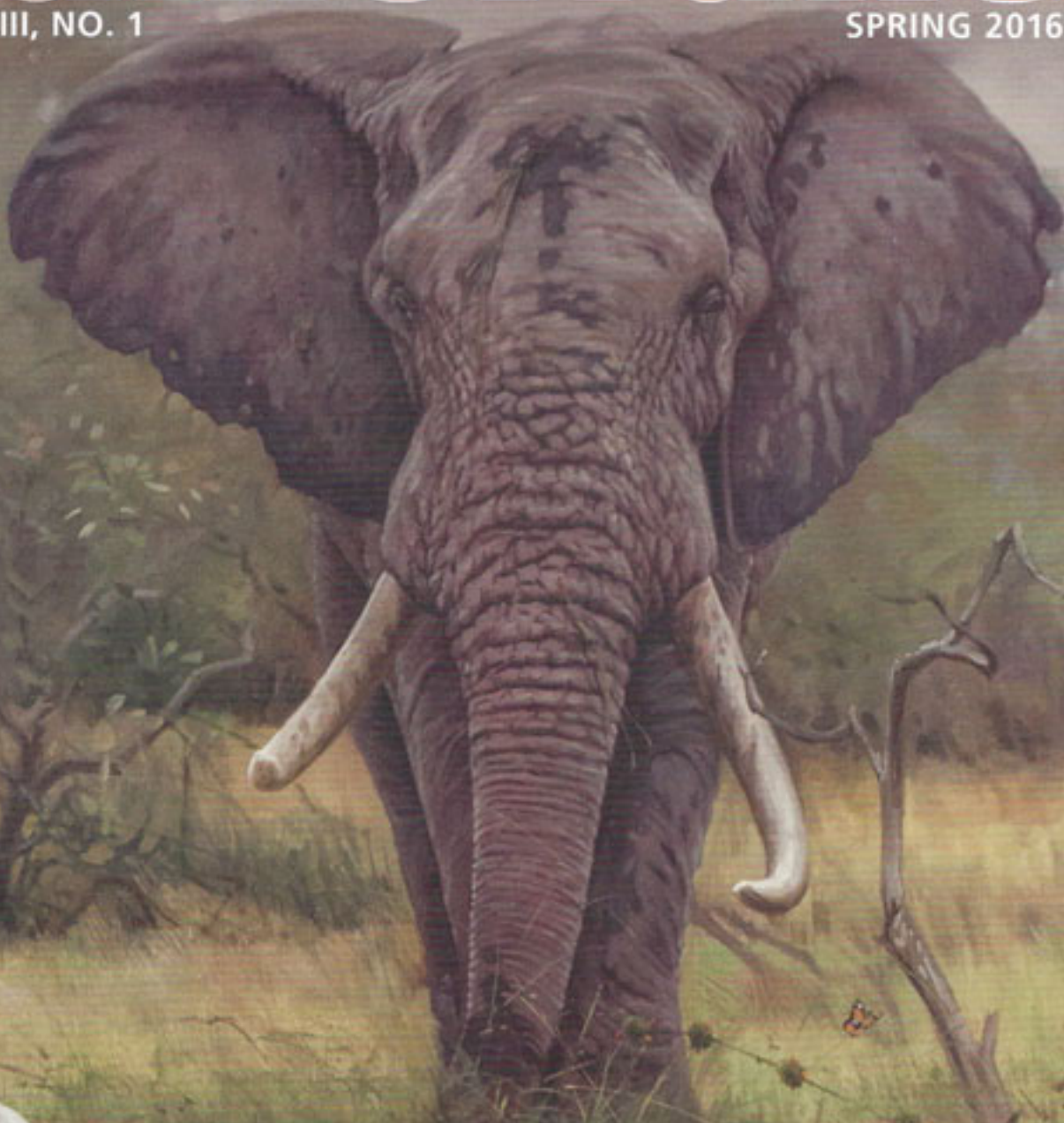


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OCELLATED TURKEY

in the Land of the Mayans

BY RYAN BASSHAM

In a dizzy haze, I rolled out of bed to the shrill sound of my alarm. It was 3:30 a.m. The time had arrived for my dad and me to make our trek to the Yucatán jungle in search of what arguably is the most beautiful of the six turkey species in the world – the ocellated turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*). This majestic bird is often referred to by several different names that vary by Central American locale: pavo, pavo ocelado, or its Mayan Indian name, ucutz il chican. Regardless, one thing that is certain: in terms of beauty, they stand in a league of their own. Very little research has been done on the ocellated turkey and less is known about the ecology of this turkey than any of the five subspecies of North American wild turkeys. The ocellated turkey exists only in a 50,000-square-mile area comprised of the Yucatán Peninsula range, including the states of Quintana Roo, Campeche and Yucatán, as well as parts of southern Tabasco and northeastern Chiapas.



MANY PEOPLE TALK ABOUT THE RUSH THEY FEEL AS BUGLING ELK ECHO THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS OR BIG WHITE-TAIL BUCKS CRASHING THROUGH A WOODLAND FOREST. BUT AT THE PROXIMITY WE WERE IN, THE LOW DRUMMING THAT GENTLY ESCALATED INTO THE UNIQUE GOBBLE AND CLUCK OF THIS OCELLATED TURKEY PROVIDED **JUST AS MUCH OF AN ADRENALINE RUSH.**

The ugly beautiful features of the ocellated turkey

OCELLATED TURKEY IN THE LAND OF THE MAYANS

Flights in and out of Campeche are few and far between. The result of this was a six-hour layover, which led to good conversation and laughs. Our outfitter met us at our hotel, and we loaded up our gear for the three-hour drive to jungle camp.

As we left the civilization of Campeche, the scenery changed from a bustling community set in colonial architecture to a rolling topography of sorghum, watermelon fields, fruit trees and eventually virgin jungle. The further we traveled, the rougher the road became. Smooth, paved roads turned to a game of pothole dodging. Then, the dirt road morphed into a narrow jungle path leading to our campsite. We continued onward and our camp appeared virtually out of nowhere. Settled in a clearing of jungle and amongst large stones and zapote trees were several tents. Some tents were for sleeping, and others were for eating and cooking. Out in front of the tents were hammocks, a skinning area and an open tent for cooking. Further back from the main camp area were the guides' "quarters." Their lodging consisted of one-man hammocks covered by mosquito netting. After unpacking, we all enjoyed our first taste of ocellated turkey over mole sauce with a side of steamed rice. It was delicious! Meals like this would be the norm for the rest of our time in the jungle.

The next morning sounded off by the roar of the generator and the camp lights struggling to flicker on. It was 4 a.m. and time to get up for our first hunt of the trip. The temperature was around 70 degrees and fairly pleasant for the moment.

Dad and I met our guides, Sergio and Noe, and we loaded up into an old white and grey GMC Jimmy. We ventured several more miles into the vast darkness of the jungle where our guides had heard some birds roosting. Noe and I grabbed our gear and unloaded, while Sergio and my dad continued further up the road. Noe explained to me that we would be as quiet as we possibly could and listen for the roosted turkey to "sing." Once we heard our first turkey sing, we dove into the jungle to close the gap as quickly as possible. We would stop every so often to listen and make sure that we were headed in the right direction. All along the way, Noe would unwrap a few pieces of toilet paper and leave them every 20 yards or so. The jungle is very thick with limited visibility, and it is very easy to get lost.

Once we got within about 150 yards of the bird, our pace slowed considerably. I learned that I am not as efficient at stalking game as I thought I was. The jungle floor was littered with small twigs and dead leaves that presented a challenge even for the most skilled hunter. I was definitely a loud gringo and had a thing or two to learn.



Edzna Temple ruins founded in 400 BC just outside of modern day Campeche.

After a quick 30 minutes, we were within 30 yards of the first ocellated turkey I had ever seen. Prior to the hunt, our outfitter had let us know that this season had been particularly difficult due to the abnormal amount of vegetation. Although only 30 yards separated us from the turkey, I could not find a presentable shot. Before we could get into a better position, we decided the best thing to do would be to back out quietly and set up elsewhere near some fruit trees.

It was now around 8 a.m. We got to the top of a ridge in the jungle and set up near some zapote trees, a reliable food source for most Yucatan wildlife. After getting our ground blind set up, we settled in and did our best to thwart off the anxious anticipation. Some time had passed with no indication of any animals nearby until, suddenly, a crash of leaves and twigs started toward us just out of sight and on the other side of the ridge. Due to my position, I was able to see the animal quickly heading our direction.

Prior to arrival, I had learned that the area we would be hunting has a decent population of grey brocket deer – a small species of deer native to the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. In Spanish, it is known as *tesemate*, and in Mayan, *yuc*. I would learn later that my guide liked hunting brocket deer more than anything else, and he became very excited the moment he saw the small creature following the game trail. He asked me several times, "¿lo quiere?" My response to his question was answered by the sound of my Beretta A400 throwing a load of shot at less than 20 yards. The shot easily found its



The sleepy fishing town of Campeche

mark, and Noe quickly rushed over to the downed animal. Before I could stand up, he excitedly turned around with a big smile on his face and exclaimed, "muy macho." We sat for a bit longer and decided to head back to the road and wait for Sergio and my dad to return.

After some lunch and a little bit of rest, we headed back out to the jungle. Noe and I once again set up a ground blind and began to wait. The sounds and sights of the jungle were quite entertaining. There are over 250 bird species that reside in the Yucatán, and although we heard and saw only a fraction of them, it was an awesome addition to the overall experience. As the night approached, we headed back to the road to listen for the turkey to sing before roosting. As luck would have it, a turkey sounded off no more than 100 yards from us. We carefully eased down the road and listened for several minutes until we heard



(left to right) Dan Cirilo, Bill Bassham, Ryan Bassham, Anthony Keene, Brian Bristow

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Author with a grey brocket deer from first morning of the hunt.



Father and son, Ryan and Bill Bassham, enjoying the success of some well-earned birds.

the bird fly up into its chosen roost for the night, and we began our stalk. Once again, I learned that I was an inefficient stalker. We got within 25 yards of the turkey and found it was roosted with a hen right by its side. Because it was about 8:30 p.m. and very dark, we decided to come back to that roost in the morning and see if we could have better chances.

Sergio and my dad didn't have any success either, and we headed back to camp. After our first day, our entire group had shot two brocket deer and three turkeys.

The second morning started earlier than the first. We skipped breakfast and headed out to our roosted turkey. We decided that since I was lucky enough to get a brocket deer the day before that it would be my dad's turn to try and stalk in. As Sergio and my dad started off into the jungle, Noe and I waited and listened. Eventually, a turkey sang on the roost and off we went. We got within 40 yards of our targeted bird when we heard a shot ring out through the jungle. Dad had his first turkey!

We continued our stalk, but the turkeys were now uneasy and another slipped away from me. Back at the truck, we grabbed our ground-blind gear and headed back out to get set up. We hadn't even set up yet, and we could hear the drumming of a tom within 100 yards. For two hours, I was taunted by the tom's continuous drumming and singing. But we never got a glimpse. A brocket deer came through our set-up, providing some relief for about 10 minutes. I felt as though my eyes were going to cross as I struggled to make out any type of movement through the thick brush. We headed back to camp to see how the rest of the group had done.

The morning brought four more turkeys in to camp. After several photo sessions and slaps on the back, we followed up lunch with a quick siesta and headed back out. The game plan was the same as before: set up a ground blind and wait patiently. Once they started singing, we tried to locate one close enough to find before it roosted. But no luck.

On his way out that afternoon, Sergio had a close call with a jaguar. Clearly shaken up at the encounter, he told me that it came within 15 yards, and he had wildly waved his machete at it, yelling at the large cat until it finally retreated.

The next day, we would need to drive even further into the jungle to get to our roosted turkeys, and would once again leave camp even earlier. It seemed that we were pushing the wildlife further back into the jungle. The usual chatter was at a minimum this morning. It was all we could do to stay awake as the Jimmy crept along the rough jungle road deeper into the darkness.

As we arrived to our starting point, the decision was made that I would go with Sergio instead of Noe. Sergio knew exactly which tree to go to and set up under. The moonlit path allowed us to sneak in undetected. As we neared the roost, we dropped to our hands and knees and began to crawl for about 50 yards until we were within 30 yards of our bird. Damp leaves clung to my hands from the recent rainfall and beneath me, I could hear the sweat dripping from my face onto the ground. It was now 4:30 a.m., and the sunrise was not for another hour or so.

The turkey was still asleep and had no indication that we were there. As we waited, my focus was on the big bird roosted in the tree not even 30 yards from me. Time started to drag on. My first indication that daylight was near was at the sound of other nearby roosted turkeys starting to drum and sing. At one point, I am quite sure I counted up to six different birds in the immediate area. While I was staring down the colorful ball of feathers perched up in the tree, he finally started to stir. The time was getting near.

Many people talk about the rush they feel as bugling elk echo through the mountains or big white-tail bucks crashing through a woodland forest. But at the proximity we were in, the low drumming that gently escalated into the unique gobble and cluck of this ocellated turkey provided just as much of an adrenaline rush.

I sat watching the bird I had traveled so far to hunt and admired it as it sang, stretched and preened. It taunted me with every move it made. Finally, the whisper I had been anxiously waiting for reached my ear, "shoot." Slowly, I raised my barrel and found its resting place alongside the trunk of the tree.



Ocellated turkey tail fans have a hypnotizing display of colors.

I quietly slipped the safety off and allowed the sights of the barrel to align with the top of the turkey's head. At the squeeze of my trigger, the Beretta A400 once again found its mark. Like a sack of rocks, my trophy plummeted to the jungle floor to find its final resting place.

Sergio and I arrived to where the bird lay and upon closer inspection, realized I had shot a tremendous specimen. We exchanged a hug, and I thanked him for his hard work. We decided that this turkey easily had two-inch or better spurs and, according to Sergio, was one of the better turkeys shot of the season. We eased our way back to the road to find Noe and my dad waiting. We all celebrated there and then later in camp with all the others.

I had done it. I had traveled to the Land of the Mayans, on hunting grounds that they had once hunted themselves, and harvested a magnificent ocellated turkey. GT

Campeche Then & Now

Campeche is now one of the least-populated Mexican states and was once the site of a flourishing Mayan civilization. Although pre-Mayan cultures inhabited the area of Campeche as early as 3,000 B.C., relatively little is known about them. The Mayans, in contrast, left extensive evidence of their civilization, which originated on the Yucatán Peninsula. About 6,000 Mayan buildings and ceremonial structures have been identified at the city of Calakmul in southern Campeche. Calakmul boasted a population of 50,000 at its height in the 6th and 7th centuries.

Spaniards reached the Yucatán Peninsula early in the 16th century. Strong efforts were made to convert the indigenous people to the Catholic faith, and more than 30 monasteries throughout the region were built. Eventually, it was discovered that logwood trees near the city of Campeche produced a valuable red dye that would benefit the wealth of Spaniards in the area. The commodity became a desired target for Caribbean pirates and thieves.

These attacks were eventually stifled by the residents when they built a wall 26 feet high around the city for protection. Much of the wall still stands today in Campeche and adds to the charm of the historic fishing town.