Hunting in New Mexico in springtime can be a seductive affair after a long winter of anticipation. And if in the end it becomes much more about the experience than the hunt, you are far richer for having been there. At least this hunter was.
Although I had known her for nearly eighteen years, I had never before seen her like this.

I had first come to her in Autumn, myself still nearly a youth, her lovely, angular shoulders draped in purple and amber and gold, and softly glowing as she waited there to meet me in the cool blue pre-dawn light just below the Divide. I had known her in Summer, her voice as sweet as a dove’s cooing lament, and her curves and undulations soothing to my weather-weary eyes. And I had seen her laid bare in Winter, sleeping peacefully and covered in white, coy and inviting, beckoning me to come explore the sweet mysteries which lay waiting beneath the pale azure sheets under which she slept.

But I had never come to her in Spring.

So when I gazed again upon her from afar and felt her compelling summons and the longing for a season we both hoped would soon return, I was once more taken by her and loved her again as though it were our first encounter.

Chama is a very private place. At least she is for me.

Not so much a place, really, as a state of mind, a state of being, for each time my boots touch her soaring slopes after too long an absence, it is as though I can breath again, easily, her dry fragrant high country air once more flowing free and unencumbered through my soul, and her ever-expanding vistas come rushing to me from distances I can only imagine back in the lesser elevations of my home to the east.

The Lodge and Ranch at Chama is the soaring centerpiece of the Jicarilla Apache Nation in northern New Mexico. And now Frank Simms, Chama’s president and general manager, had invited me here to hunt Merriam’s turkeys. I had always dreamed of hunting here in springtime, and now I would be going out with my longtime friend and Chama’s head guide, Pat Carpenter.

On our first morning, we hiked up into the high country an hour before daylight. We heard our first bird gobble all on his own to the north just before daybreak.

We moved like shadows in the half-light, down the mountain to the upper edge of a sloping meadow where we set up in a small clump of oak brush and gently whispered good morning to him. He immediately fired back at us, but so did every hen within hailing distance, vehemently protesting what they obviously perceived to be strange ladies from afar.

Life was good for this old gobbler, with more hens than he knew what to do with, although I will have to give him credit for his efforts. It was a real party atmosphere down there in the swale that morning, and the last we heard of him two hours later he was moving up the mountain to the east, his home crew obviously pleased with his performance.

And that’s the way the morning went. Oh, there were plenty of gobblers and plenty of gobbling . . . and a grand time was had by all. By day’s end, Pat and I had heard more gobbling than either of us could remember having heard for a very long time, but all we had to show for it was our overly extended patience and good temperament.

To our great surprise and infinite delight, when we got back to the Lodge that evening, Terry Tiner, our friend and accomplice on many adventures, was there waiting for us. Knowing Pat and I as well as he does, when Terry heard what we...
were up to, he rightly decided that we could probably use some adult supervision and so had come up from Santa Fe to join us. Pat and I were both very happy to see him, and we all eagerly looked forward to going out together at first light.

We began our search above Willow Creek, and within minutes Pat and Terry, who spoke the native Merriam language far better than I, had a trio of toms so torn up over the prospect of new hens that they could hardly contain themselves. We ducked into cover at the edge of a high meadow, but for some reason the trio would come just so far, but no farther. It was very frustrating, for Terry only had this one day to spend with us before he had to go back to Santa Fe, and I desperately wanted to get a bird with all three of us present and accounted for.

For nearly forty-five minutes the birds gobbled, alternately moving in below us, then back onto the wooded shelf where we had first heard them, and finally up and over the far ridge where we lost them.
We were already bearing in the general direction of Sawmill Canyon and so we continued to climb toward the saddle high along the crest of the ridge at its northern end. We came in from the west with the day waning and the lowering afternoon sun at our backs. I followed along behind Terry and Pat as we threaded our way down the valley along the shaded fringes of the aspens.

It seemed to me that we passed several good locations where we could have set up, but I knew that the smartest thing I could do was to keep quiet and follow the experts. Aside from being two of my dearest friends, Pat and Terry are the finest guides I have ever had the honor to hunt with, and my confidence in them is total and without question. When we finally reached our destination, my confidence was confirmed.

To our right, the pine-and-aspen-bordered valley fell away to the next ridge south, and the broad expanse of green directly in front of us led across into the sunlit aspen edge 200 yards to the east. The saddle itself was above us 300 yards north, and we were set up in the shaded edge of the woods, backed by the valley’s sweeping west ridge, so that any bird that might come in would be looking into the afternoon sun. The setup was perfect, and as Pat and I crawled into an old windfall, Terry headed eighty yards up the shaded slope behind us, overlooking the entire valley.

As soon as we were all settled in, we began calling, at first softly and intermittently, trying to sound as casual as possible. Then Pat and Terry got into a rather heated debate, Pat with his signature glass call and Terry with his Lynch box, and I finally began to add my two cents worth with my own matched pair of little box slates. For two hours we sat there calling intermittently, the view more spectacular than any I had encountered since my last sojourn here to Chama.

Across the valley, we watched every movement of the woods, backed by the valley’s far-reaching tone that seemed to light the peg that the rough, course-sanded glass required. “I’ve never heard a call quite like this before.”

For his part, it only took Pat a couple of tries to get the hang of the circular, lifting stutter stroke that works best with my box slates, and now making perfect little yelps and purrs, he leaned over and whispered, “I get it. These things take a different motion than I’m used to.”

As silently as possible, I responded, “Yeah, you’re sounding really good, but it’s gonna take me a while to get the hang of this glass call.”

“Turkey!” Pat’s low whisper said all it needed to say.

“Where?” And before Pat could answer, I looked up and out across the valley and saw him as he stepped from a notch in the aspens, big and black-bodied with the feathers along the base of his tail and the tips of his half raised fan all edged in ivory, and that lovely head pulsing blue and red in the late-afternoon sun.

Even from 200 yards we could sense his deliberation in the way he carried himself, searching for the hens, which he simply could not believe weren’t right here in plain sight waiting for him.

His head and wings were tipped down slightly and his chest was only partially puffed out, and he moved toward us with a somewhat sideways motion, more an elegant dance than a closing strut, as though he were saving his best for the ladies.

“Big bird,” Pat whispered, his binoculars now trained on our approaching guest of honor. “Only about a six-inch beard” . . . then, “ . . . real bushy beard . . . your call.”

Even from so far down the valley and as he’d moved up the far ridge through the dark timber, he’d located us precisely. We watched him as he came, heading straight across in our direction, first down the open sunlit slope in front, then up toward us as he began zigzagging back and forth, searching for the mystery hens.

My gun was angled ten degrees to the left, and I heard Pat whisper
“Don’t move,” as the big bird began to alternately disappear and reappear among the open aspens, now only forty yards in front of us. No one dared call; nor did we need to, for he knew well enough where we were and was doing exactly what we wanted him to do, and there was no purpose in doing anything that might allow him to more accurately pinpoint our location. My impression was that he was keyed primarily on Terry’s position, for he began angling around to our right, weaving in and out of the trees as he moved directly across our line of sight, and now he had me turned in the wrong direction.

Still, I dared not move as he came closer, ever closer, cautiously circling, barely twenty-five yards in front of us until he momentarily disappeared behind some low brush and an old weathered snag. Now I could make my move, and I pivoted slowly to the right, my eyes focused down the rib of the barrel to the outer edge of the brush where I expected him to reappear, and I caught a subtle movement beside me as Pat’s hands discreetly came up to his ears.

And then he was there, stepping out barely clear just a foot to the right of the covering brush scarcely twenty yards distant, and he stopped and arched his back and raised his lovely pulsing magenta head searching, ever searching, for the love of his life, and the thin gold beard found the base of his thick blue neck and the curve of my finger slowly tightened on the trigger and the whole valley was suddenly filled with the last sound the old gobbler ever heard.

Both my companions immediately expressed their unqualified verbal approval and Pat knocked me sideways as I eased the shotgun back on safety, and Terry was off the ridge and on the bird before Pat and I could even get to our feet. I’m certain that we were all saying something we hoped would be profound, but for the life of me I cannot remember what it was. But no matter; words could never do justice to such a moment, for it was the feeling and emotion of sharing it with such close and committed friends that counted most.

Feathers were still floating in the breeze and tumbling away across the valley as Pat and I arrived on the scene, and Terry thumped me hard on the other shoulder and we all three clasped hands high in the air.

Never had I seen such a stunning turkey. His rippling plumage seemed to have collected the very essence of the high country, scattering its iridescence to the four winds. The ivory tips of his tail-feathers were broomed with experience and expertise, and the broad bases of his spurs were crowned with shortened, worn and well-rounded translucent tips. Everything about him exuded age and character. Even his beard, though only six inches in length, was full and whole, and the ends of its fibers were uniformly rounded and upturned.

He was the grandest turkey I had ever seen, made even grander by the magnificence of the late-afternoon setting and the companionship of my brothers in arms. We found an old stump with character to match his own, and we carefully rested him on it and respectfully photographed him, then gathered our meager gear and single spent shell, and Pat carried the shotgun and Terry the camera, and I carried our turkey as we made our way down the valley, past the Buck Pond, then up and out through the canyon and back to base.

But part of my soul stayed up there with the old gobbler’s that evening at the head of Sawmill Canyon, high in the land of the Apache, once again breathing easily and resting peacefully alongside the few ivory tipped feathers still glowing softly there in Chama’s warm seductive light.

It rests there still.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

The turkey season in New Mexico varies from year to year, but generally runs from mid-April through early May. The cost of a four-night, three-day spring turkey hunt at Chama is $2,750 plus tax and applicable license fees and includes lodging and dining. A second gobbler, if allowed, can be hunted for an additional $500. For information on hunting and fishing at the Lodge and Ranch at Chama, call 1-505-756-2133 or visit: www.lodgeatchama.com.

The Merit of Solitude
Continued from 147

on at once. Pink, purple, green, lead eyes, flash and profile — when they’re on the attack, the recipe is not as important as simply keeping your fly in the middle of all the slashing and porpoising.

“We really try hard to accommodate the angler’s preference,” Rus told me on the morning of our second day as the groups fanned out in search of new challenges. “Some are into the finesse and the more technical approach that the char require, and others are only interested in the big salmon bites and the long runs.

“We’ve got the best of both — and plenty to do if you get tired of fishing — and that makes it fun for the guides and the guests.”

On that day I tagged along and photographed Chris Cooper from Michigan as he harassed pods of rolling silvers, while Michael and Nigel concentrated on a spot-and-stalk mission for char. Back at dinner that night, Texans Carol Eix and Colleen Church recounted their guided beach-walk and waterfall hike, and gave the rest of us grief for being entirely too consumed with a bunch of silly fish.

All differences of opinion on that matter and other topics were settled each evening at the camp’s northernmost washer pit. By week’s end it was Tony Leyland from northern England and the two anglers from Down Under who were schoolins us “Yanks” on the intricacies of washer pitching.

On our last day I was standing next to the lunch fire with head guide, Ted Menderek, as he tended two fresh salmon fillets over a bed of hot alder coals. The helicopter was parked nearby, and our assembly of nine rods was spread out over a mile of river and banging with some of the largest silvers we had found that week. Double and triple hookups were common that morning and Chris Cooper, along with his brother, Mark, and father, Darrell, were talking about flight-seeing on the way back to camp instead of fishing for the remainder of the day.