The aroma and anticipation of an early Thanksgiving turkey feast builds if only in spirit as hunters prepare for one of the craftiest of California's wild game birds: the wild turkey. The spring turkey season opens March 31 and runs through May 6, statewide.

Wild turkeys are well established in the oak woodlands of the coast ranges and lower elevations of the Sierra Nevada. Wild turkey hunting opportunities are available to the public on most National Forests, some Bureau of Land Management lands, and some California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) owned wildlife areas. Contact local agency offices for more information.

When scouting an area for turkey signs look for tracks, feathers, scratching, dusting areas and droppings. Look for dusting areas with tracks in them or roost trees with droppings and feathers under them. In dry areas, search around water sources for turkey tracks. The best times to look or listen for turkeys include the early morning hours until mid-morning, and late in the evening as the turkeys go to roost.

Turkey hunting can prove to be one of the most challenging as the gobblers are known for their elusive and skittish nature. Hunter camouflage is necessary for hunting the wild turkey, and the best camouflage clothing is both protective and comfortable. Hands, face, and gun should be camouflaged. However, DFG warns that the better you are camouflaged the less likely another hunter will be able to see you. The proper way to notify an approaching hunter is to calmly and clearly speak to him or her. Do not move, wave, or use a turkey call to alert the hunter. Another safety tip is to never wear red, white or blue colored clothing because the coloration can be mistaken for colors found on wild turkeys.

A current California hunting license and Upland Game Bird Stamp are required to hunt wild turkeys. Shooting hours are one-half hour before sunrise until 4 p.m. The limit for the spring season is one bearded turkey per day, three per season. (A bearded turkey is one having a beard visible through the breast feathers.)

For complete rules, consult the 2000/2001 California Hunting Regulations Resident and Migratory Upland Game Birds, available at DFG offices statewide and on the DFG website at www.dfg.ca.gov.