



Pavo! Pavo!
The Odyssey of
Ocellated Turkey
Hunting

by

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Chapter 3d

*Wooing Uaxactun's Jungle Pavo:
El Gringo Cazador Cantar*

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Wooing Uaxactun's Jungle Pavo: El Gringo Cazador Cantar

Even before I had returned from my first Guatemalan ocellated turkey hunting adventure with Lovett Williams in 2004, substantial progress had been made in understanding the calls necessary to call in to harvest the ocellated *pavo* (*turkey*) as opposed to the highly successful, pragmatic and traditional Mayan practice of roost shooting. In fact, each of the four hunters in Lovett's second 2004, Carmelita-based ocellated camp that followed my own hunt had taken their turkeys on the first morning. Each had called in his bird using either the Doug Camp-made "Camp Caller" owl caller to produce a hut-hut-hut sound or the bird was called in with the Cass Creek International, a hand-held, electronic caller enabled with five recorded ocellated turkey calls. Still, during ocellated turkey hunts that I was a party to in Mexico in 2005 and 2006; the majority of the birds killed were shot off the roost. However, knowing that the birds could be called in, I wanted to experience it for myself. So, in 2007, I set up a hunt for the spring of 2008 with Lovett for myself and long-time friend Dr. Jesse Brown - an emergency veterinarian from Kannapolis, NC - to, hopefully, experience calling in an ocellated turkey. Based upon my prior hunts for this beautiful bird, I wanted to hunt during the week of April 15-22 and since I had already hunted Lovett's Carmelita-based camp, I wanted to hunt his Uaxactun-based operation. He had two openings; we placed our deposits in June.

We arrived in Flores, Guatemala a day earlier than actually necessary for our hunt to commence so that we could spend a day hiking and visiting Tikal National Park (*figure 1*) and taking in the splendor of its ancient Mayan pyramids (*figures 2a, 2b*) and the other ruins (*figure 3*) found throughout the park. Live attractions at the park included cedar, mahogany and the especially beautiful Ceiba tree (*figure 4*), the national tree of Guatemala. In addition, numerous animal species were seen which included coatimundis (*figure 5*), toucans, agoutis, oropendula birds and, of course, ocellated turkeys (*figure 6*).

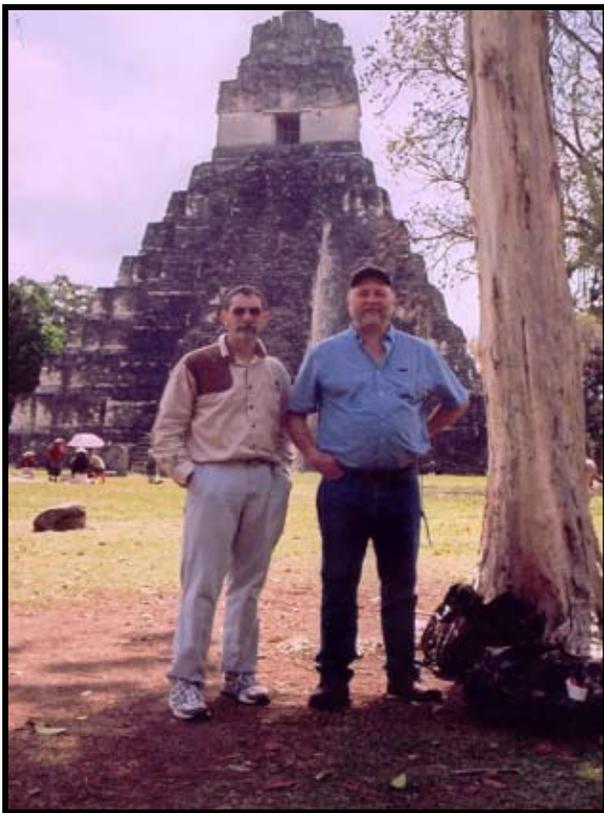
Later that same evening, we met Lovett and American-born interpreter Erick Baur and other hunters including not only fellow hunters going to Uaxactun but also those whose hunting destination was Lovett's Carmelita-based camp. The proposed plan was to meet in the lobby of the Camino Real Tikal Hotel just outside the village of El Remate at 11:00 the following morning to get our ocellated adventure underway (*figure 7*). The trip included 36 kilometers to Tikal together with another 28 kilometers to the village of Uaxactun (*figure 8*) where we ate a hot lunch of rice, tortillas, chicken and a potato. Afterward, we purchased cornhusk dolls made by the village children (*figure 9*) and then began the final 17 kilometers through the jungle to the hunting camp itself.

This final leg of the journey required two hours to complete during which time we made several detours which necessitated the accompanying scouts and guides clearing jungle brush and undergrowth to effectively bypass the main road in order to avoid deeply rutted sections. It seemed the main road served as a major thoroughfare between the Mexican border to the north some 25 miles from Uaxactun and Flores to the south of Uaxactun about 45 miles. Otherwise, the jungle road served as a logging road. On each side of the road, the jungle seemed a virtually impenetrable wall save for the occasional



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Figure 1: Entrance to Tikal National Park.



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Figure 2a and 2b: Mayan pyramids, Temple II (upper) Temple VI (lower)



Figure 3: Necropolis between and south of Temple pyramids I and II.



Figure 4: Ceiba tree in Tikal National Park.



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Figure 5: Coatimundis in Tikal National Park.



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Figure 6: Ocellated turkey (jake) in Tikal National Park.



Figure 7: Loading the vehicles headed to Uaxactun-based ocellated camp



Figure 8: Diner in Uaxactun.



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Figure 9: Uaxactun children with cornhusk dolls.



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Figure 10: Cordoza palms along jungle road to ocellated camp.

superficial window which at best permitted visualization to a maximum of 25 yards. The most intriguing and interesting part of the drive to camp was a 200 yard detour which coursed through a type of palm forest known as cordoza palms (*figure 10*). The trees had fronds or branches which emanated from the trunk at the ground and even the entirety of the plants trunk, some of them 15-20 feet in height. This palm forest while indeed beautiful seemed ancient, even prehistoric, akin to a palm forest straight out of Jurassic Park.

We arrived at camp at 4:15 p.m. on Thursday, April 17 whereupon Jesse made the almost immediate observation that the jungle was indeed thick with foliage and vegetation. So much so that the gray, four wheel drive, double cab pickup that we had ridden in to camp was all but totally obscured and, had we not already seen the vehicle, we could not have even identified it as being a vehicle from the vantage point of the front of our hut - a distance of about 20 yards. Indeed, from any single vantage point in the newly erected ocellated camp only two thatched-roofed huts could be visualized. This Uaxactun-based ocellated camp while not new in the strictest sense - in operation since 1999 - had new structures owing to the original Uaxactun-based hunting camp facilities being burned sometime since the end of the 2007 season. Thus, Lovett's 2008 camp was located somewhat closer to the main thoroughfare and it had all new facilities which included: a dining hut (*figure 11*); three hunter huts (two hunters/hut [*figure 12*]) with cots and cotton-stuffed mattresses which, by the way, to enjoy sleeping on you have to be either a fanatic turkey hunter - Is that redundant? - or a religious zealot; cooking hut (*figure 13*); guides and scouts hut (*figure 14*); miscellaneous huts (for Lovett and the interpreter); in addition to the shower area (*figure 15*) and latrine (*figure 16*).

After being assigned our huts and unpacking the vehicles, we made for the shooting range - a measured 24 yards. All hunters shot at least a single round and each hunter found the single shot, Russian -made shotguns totally acceptable. Most hunters chose number 6 shot while a couple opted for number 4 shot. We then retired to the meal hut for supper and later a tutorial from Lovett on hunting the ocellated turkey using the Cass Creek International caller and its associated five ocellated turkey calls (*figure 17*). By ten o'clock all hunters had made their way to their respective huts and after a warning that lights were soon to be off, the distant generator groaned to a halt. Besides a moon three nights shy of full and the intense starlight, the only other light to be seen emanated from throngs of fireflies that buzzed throughout the surrounding jungle emitting light from two "eyes" on the top of their mid-sections (*figure 18*). The jungle was relatively cool this night for the time of year, perhaps in the lower 70's. Usually during the April turkey season in northern Guatemala, you typically sleep in your skivvies with a single sheet for later in the night. However, on this night, a double layer of sheet was needed. Sleep came quickly.

We were awakened the first morning (Friday, April 18) at 3:00 by the camp's interpreter, Oscar. After quickly dressing and grabbing a couple of slices of watermelon for breakfast, we met in the vehicle parking area where we were assigned guides together with their respective scouts. I was assigned to the Mayan guide Emilio and his scout Marcos. Both were older than most of the other guides and scouts in camp and in fact, later in the week, I learned in conversations with Marcos that he was 47 years old. His countenance and poise reminded me of Mayan warriors depicted in the Mel Gibson movie, "Apocalypto."

We boarded the truck with James Brogan and his guide and scout and proceeded to drive south out of camp. Five minutes into our drive - I was just getting my gear which included a seat cushion, my Thermacel® and my shotgun situated in the truck - we stopped. Emilio and Marcos who had been riding in the back jumped out; after realizing it was my guide and scout who were waiting, I too stepped out of the vehicle. The four wheel drive's lights faded into the jungle darkness. It was 4:00 a.m. From my vantage point at the side of the road and even without a flashlight, the upside down palmetto leaves that Marcos had placed in his hastily cleared trail to the bird he had roosted the evening before could



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Figure 11: Dining hut at Uaxactun-based ocellated turkey camp.



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Figure 12: Representative example of the hunter huts.



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Figure 13: Camp Cook's hut.



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Figure 14: Mayan ocellated turkey scouts outside their hut.



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Figure 15: Camp shower area



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Figure 16: Camp latrine.



Figure 17: Cass Creek International Turkey Caller.



Figure 18: Guatemalan firefly.

easily be seen by the reflection of the moon's light. Emilio, Marcos and I followed the trail for perhaps 200 yards before Emilio doused his light. We left Marcos and together Emilio and I covered the next 100 yards by moonlight alone before sitting down at the north side of a Ceiba tree with its smooth bark against our backs and its large buttressing roots protruding from its base. It was 4:30 a.m. when we sat down. Almost immediately we heard roaring - almost like the distant roaring of a lion or perhaps the bellowing of a large male alligator during the breeding season. Either way, the sound seemed almost primordial, but from prior experience I knew that it was a troop of howler monkeys. They howled until almost daylight. Another sound heard some 20 minutes into our jungle vigil was a little more disconcerting. I heard leaves rustling behind me and to my left. The rustling grew closer and within a couple of minutes, the source of the rustling passed within 18 inches of me and continued on. In the darkness, I imagined it to be some jungle rat which didn't particularly bother me until I further imagined the possibility of a fer-de-lance slithering along following the scent trail. However, I never heard anything else until 5:20 a.m. when the gobbler began to sing in a tree to our north and perhaps 20 yards out. Huge palm leaves obscured his exact location in his roost tree from us; however, had I so desired, we could easily have stood and moved to one side or the other which no doubt would have permitted our sighting the bird. But, I was here to call one in, not to roost shoot him. I had roost shot my first ocellated turkey in 2004 but this hunt was strictly for the purpose of hunting one that was *caminado* that is to say, a walking bird.

The song of the ocellated turkey is in no way reminiscent of the gobble of the ocellated's more northerly cousins. Rather, his song consists of six to nine bongo-like bass tones which quicken in both volume and cadence only to climax in a crescendo that ultimately culminates in a sound akin to a yodel. The entirety of each full song lasts for perhaps three seconds. This particular bird sang 164 times before flying down to the northwest of our position at 6:35 a.m. We listened intently to determine whether the bird was moving or stationary after flying down. Within a couple of minutes of flying down, his bass bongo tones told us he was moving to the north. Emilio and I moved our location approximately ten yards toward the gobbler to the base of yet another large Ceiba tree with even more imposing buttressing roots. While moving to the tree, we were spotted by a troop of howler monkeys, possibly the same ones we had heard earlier during the darkness but which were then at least 200 yards to the south. Upon spotting us, they began to shake trees and even break limbs which they then threw at us. They kept this activity up for at least 45 minutes after we had made our second set up. Our set-up between two roots of this second Ceiba tree afforded a view to the west down a relatively open natural lane approximately 18 inches wide for perhaps 30 yards while directly to the north I had a similarly narrow opening that permitted a view of about 25 yards. In the intervening 90 degrees between the two lanes, the jungle was thick and because the sun was to our right, we could occasionally see for 15 or 16 yards as a ray of sun would penetrate the foliage in front of us in first one place and then another. The bird sang to the north-northwest of our set up and we attempted to call him in using the honk/whistle call. Over a 30 minute period he circled to the west and just for the briefest of moments, I caught a glimpse of him walking but my gun was not pointed in that direction and by the time I had moved it, I could no longer see him. Between the shafts of sunlight penetrating the jungle foliage and the alternating shadows, I never saw him again though he stopped in front of us for a full five minutes, not more than 12 yards from us and all the while singing. Eventually, he moved to our right (east) and all the while still continuing his singing. He had sung perhaps 40 times on the ground before walking off to the east with finally even the deep bongo portion of his song eventually fading from our ears. Despite the fact that I asked that the scouts listen for this bird every morning and evening for the remainder of the hunt, they reportedly never heard him again.

Emilio and I made our way back to the road where we met Marcos and a couple of other scouts who had heard a bird walking and singing on the same side of the road as we had been hunting;



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Figure 19: Meat pole after first morning hunt at Uaxactun-based ocellated turkey camp



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Figure 20: Jesse Brown's 1 ½ inch spurred ocellated gobbler - his first.

however, the bird was a couple of hundred yards closer to camp than where we had emerged from the jungle. Emilio and I eased into the jungle for perhaps a hundred yards and heard nothing despite pressing the song button three or four times on the caller. We then made our way back to the road and were driven back to camp.

Arriving back in camp about 7:30 a.m. there were three birds on the camp pole (*figure 19*). Jesse had called his 1 ½ inch spurred ocellated gobbler in using the loud whistle and had collected him at 7:15 a.m. (*figure 20*). He had even missed a second bird which he and his guide Mainor and scout Yomoni had heard whilst walking through the jungle making their way back to the road. His second shot had connected squarely with a tree at 14 yards. James Brogan had taken his first ocellated gobbler in the traditional Mayan manner of roost shooting. It too was a fine spurred gobbler with spurs in excess of 1 ½ inches (*figure 21*). E. B. Pannkuk Jr. had likewise taken an inch and three quarter spurred tom (*figure 22*) but had killed it late, at 10:00 a.m., while his younger son Erik took his bird at 5:55 a.m. following a combination use of the loud whistle and the song calls (*figure 23*). Finally, E. B. Pannkuk III had taken his first turkey ever - of any species or sub-species - a full 2 inch spurred ocellated gobbler which had walked in to his set-up though he had not called (*figure 24*). After listening to the various recounts of the morning hunts, we all sat down to a hearty brunch of black beans, tortillas and fruit while the camp skimmers cleaned the turkeys. Afterwards, most of us took a siesta before the afternoon hunt.

The afternoon hunt of the first day included the three Pannkuks remaining in camp continuing their siestas with Jesse and James heading out to the north of camp while Emilio and I were driven south. Emilio and I exited the vehicle and made toward a path which entered the jungle directly on the opposite side of the jungle road from our morning hunt. Quietly entering the jungle a small clearing of perhaps a quarter acre became apparent some 60 yards off the road. All undergrowth had been cut and removed and sufficient large trees remained standing to provide a natural shade to the setting. We set up and called using primarily the honk/whistle call. Almost immediately a troop of howler monkeys fixated on us and began a three-quarter hour harassment consisting of predominantly howls but interjected with the occasional tossed limbs thrown our way. We neither saw nor heard any turkeys but the jungle opening provided for the observation of many other native birds that afternoon including a hawk and several pairs of parrots.

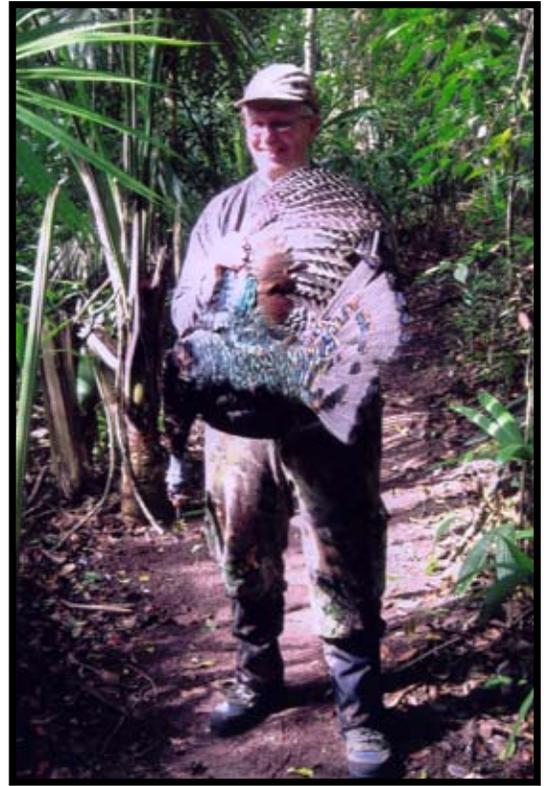
Hearing nothing fly-up to roost, Emilio and I headed back to camp on foot, an effort that required only 45 minutes but was rewarded with the sighting of a spider monkey crossing the road in the tree tops above us. Arriving back at camp at about 7:00 p.m. we noted one of the vehicles had not yet returned: Jesse and James were still out. At 8:30 p.m. they still had not returned and the second vehicle together with a full complement of guides and scouts was sent to look for them. Supper which included an abundance of turkey was then served to those present and we then shuffled off to our huts with still no sign of Jesse or James.

Awakened the second morning (Saturday, April 19) of our hunt at three o'clock, I noted Jesse in his bunk. He related his having returned to camp just four hours earlier after the vehicle he and James traveled in got stuck four times over a distance of 19 kilometers (about 11 miles). He also related having shot his second bird in the traditional Mayan manner at about 7:30 p.m. and at 35 yards. His bird had two of the most beautiful spurs I have ever seen on an ocellated turkey; they were hooked, jet-black and each 1 15/16 inches in length (*figure 25*). I then grabbed a couple of pieces of melon and met Emilio and Marcos at the truck. Together we loaded up at 3:30 a.m. for a short 20 minute drive. This particular hunt was to transpire northwest of the camp at a place locally referred to as Santa Izabel. Again, after being let out of the vehicle, we followed upside down palmetto leaves to the listening post some 150 yards into the jungle. Marcos indicated our listening post and the three of us sat down and quietly doused ourselves in Deet. I inquired as to the location of the roasted bird with "Donde es Pavo (Where is pavo)?" By the moonlight I could see that Marcos pointed to the northeast and replied, "one



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Figure 21: James Brogan's first Guatemalan ocellated turkey harvested per traditional Mayan manner.



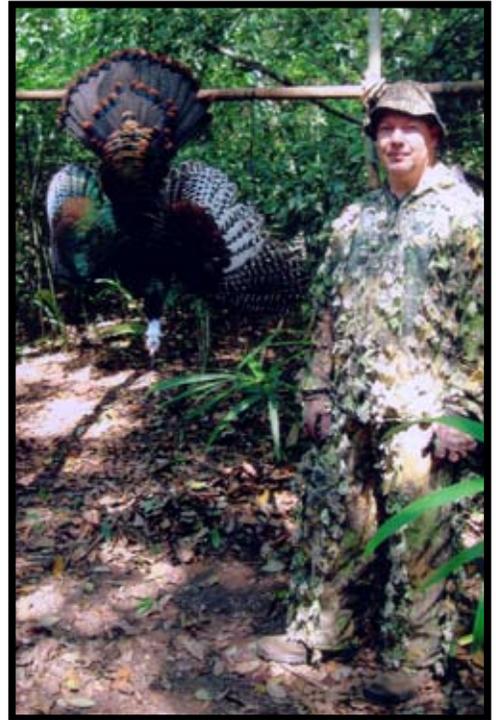
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Figure 22: E.B Pannkuk Jr.'s 1 3/4 inch spurred Guatemalan ocellated turkey



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Figure 23: Erik Pannkuk with his first ocellated turkey gobbler.



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Figure 24: E. B. Punnkuk III's first wild turkey harvest - 2 inch spurred Guatemalan ocellated turkey.



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Figure 25: Jesse Brown's 1 15/16 inch spurred Guatemalan ocellated turkey.

hundred meters". It was 4:20 a.m. and we began our wait. By 5:20 a.m. no bird had sung. Emilio and Marcos engaged in a quiet but animated discussion, the bottom line of their conversation being that they could not imagine why the bird was not singing. He had sung many times the evening before and while Marcos had not heard him fly up to roost, he was emphatic that the bird had been singing just before fly up.

At 5:45 a.m. a bird to the east issued his song from perhaps 150 yards. I looked at them and stated, "vamos". Marcos stayed with Emilio's machete and the drinking water and quietly Emilio and I made our approach. Coming upon somewhat of a clearing about half way to the bird, we took our stand next to a 4 inch diameter tree from where we could see down a lane directly to the east about 35 yards and more generally for about 180 degrees toward the bird, we could see a solid 20 yards. The bird sang no more from his roost but after his initial song from the ground, I used the caller to make the song call. A couple of minutes later, he sang two more times in quick succession and obviously closer; I pressed the song button once more in response. Movement caught my eye to the southeast and at the same time I felt Emilio's hand on my right shoulder accompanied by "pavo". The gobbler was following a hembra (hen) and my gun followed the gobbler until the hen stepped behind a tree. The gobbler for a split second was in a narrow opening at 17 yards. At the shot, the hen flew straight up through the jungle canopy and the gobbler never flopped - not a single feather was dislodged though an abundance of small ground vegetation was also "harvested" by the three inch number 4 shot. Emilio's watch read 6:00 a.m. and I had just collected my first "called in" ocellated turkey. Ironically, it was exactly four years to the day since I had taken my first ocellated gobbler. Marcos began whistling and Emilio let him know that a bird had indeed been taken. Upon reaching us, we looked about the relatively open area of my harvest and noted a bare circular area approximately 4 to 5 feet in diameter which had drag marks. Lovett later confirmed that what we had found was indeed a strutting area. We snapped a few photos of my bird

and made our way back to our morning listening post where machetes and backpacks with water bottles had been left. Within 25 to 30 feet of our early morning listening post we walked right up on a dead ocellated turkey gobbler, a “muy grande pavo (a very large turkey)” in the words of Marcos. There was much spirited conversation between Emilio and Marcos over the next few minutes and by interpreting a word here and there in their conversation, I was able to discern that Marcos believed that this was the bird he had heard the evening before. Earlier this morning he could not understand why the bird had not sung. But, the two surmised that the gobbler had been killed by a gaviolon (eagle) late the evening before. I wanted to bring the bird back to camp but both said no. I assumed that Lovett had told them not to bring anything dead into the camp unless the hunter had made the kill. In any event the bird had very long spurs that appeared to be a full two inches in length. We left the bird and walked back to camp with my gobbler dangling from a pole between Marcos and myself. Along the way we saw a doe venado (Brocket deer) which let us approach to within 45 yards.

Upon returning to camp my bird was determined to weigh 11 pounds 1 ounce and had 1 11/16 inch spurs (*figure 26*). I related the finding of the dead gobbler whereupon Lovett sent Marcos back with a couple of other scouts to retrieve it. It was later determined to have carried 1 15/16 inch spurs and the general consensus was that the gobbler had died, no doubt the evening before, as the result of having been spurred through the brain by another bird.

For the remainder of this, the second day’s hunt, all hunters stayed in camp catching up on missed sleep. The scouts ventured out later in the evening to find singing birds in anticipation of the following morning’s hunt.

Jesse awakened me at 1:39 the third morning (Sunday, April 20) with “Scott, man wake up there’s a snake in the hut”. Thinking that I was dreaming, I nonetheless turned to see Jesse shining his flashlight toward the mat on the floor between our two bunks. In the spotlight was a coiled gray snake with dark brown triangular blotches along its sides. The snake was not more than a couple of inches from Jesse’s shoes. He related that he was just about to swing his feet out from under his mosquito netting when something told him to check out the mat where his shoes were. Seeing the snake; he awakened me to verify his first impression of its identification. It was indeed a Fer-de-Lance. I shined my light about the remainder of the mat and under both of our bunks before picking up my shoe to hit the snake. I hit at it, it struck and then made its way under Jesse’s bunk and into the leaves littering the jungle floor. Donning his snake boots, Jesse made his pit stop and then climbed back into his bunk. We discussed the snake for the next 20 or so minutes before Jesse fell back to sleep - at least he snored like he was asleep. I laid awake until three when Pablo awakened me with a flashlight in my eyes. As he turned to leave, I asked if the generator was on to which he replied in the affirmative. I then asked him to pull the light cord and turn on our hut light. He did so on his way out and I immediately scanned the matt. There, just as an hour and a half earlier, lay yet another - or perhaps the same - Fer-de-Lance beside Jesse’s shoes. Excitedly I instructed Pablo to get a stick and come back and kill the snake to which Jesse said, “are you kidding, there’s another snake?” Pablo returned, looked at the snake and uttered, “culebra (snake)”. Then, with a four foot stick, he deftly delivered a single, swift blow directly to the head of the tightly coiled snake which immediately dispatched it. It was 18 inches long and beautifully marked; it had to have very recently shed its skin. We made pictures of it and then instructed Pablo to keep him until we returned from our morning hunt (*figure 27*). Jesse had decided to go with me and try to get an ocellated harvest on video.

We quickly donned our camo, grabbed some melon and water and prepared to head to the truck. Just before leaving camp I ran back to our hut to brush my teeth. My toothbrush and paste were situated on the little lashed-together table at the back of our hut. I retrieved my brush and paste and a bottle of water and quickly began my chore. From the light at the opposite end of the hut, I could see something on the ground about two feet from my left foot. I retrieved my flashlight from my overall bib. There



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Figure 26: Scott Branton's first "called in" Guatemalan ocellated turkey, 1 11/16 inch spurs.



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Figure 27: Fer-de-Lance (Terciopelo, barba amarilla) found in hunter's hut on floor mat.

was no mistaking that pattern, it was yet another Fer-de-Lance and about the same size as the other two we had seen. Before I could even think to call for Pablo and his stick, the snake had slithered off toward a rotted fallen log where it quickly disappeared. I abruptly ended my tooth brushing and headed for the waiting truck.

Marcos, Emilio, Jesse and myself together with the guide Alphonso who had found the bird the evening before were driven up the road to the north from camp for about 15 minutes. The five of us exited the vehicle and followed Alphonso through the jungle for approximately ½ mile. We got off the trail a couple of times but the guides quickly found the bent or broken vegetation that Alphonso had used to create his exit trail the night before. We sat quietly beside some palm trees facing the east for almost an hour before hearing the first of six songs we would hear from the roosted gobbler before we were able to get into position on him. He was roosted to the south of our position about 80 or 90 yards. Leaving Alphonso and Marcos at our listening post, Jesse, Emilio and I headed toward the bird. We actually got to within 15 yards of him and could see him silhouetted against the morning sky. During our trek we made quite a bit of noise, so much so that the bird quit singing for almost 15 minutes. During this time we made our way to a vantage point that let us see the tree the bird was roosted in and with more daylight, while we couldn't see the bird itself, we could see the tree move as he sang. He eventually sang another 33 times before flying down to the northwest of our set-up. We tried several calls including the loud whistle, the song and the honk/whistle but all to no avail. He had flown down to an approaching hen which had come to him from the same direction as we had been earlier when sitting beside the palms. The birds eventually made their way to the northwest while we attempted to circle to the southwest. Eventually they went out of our hearing but Alphonso and Marcos stayed with them and then through whistling themselves were able to get Emilio's attention. Emilio left Jesse and I and went to Alphonso and Marcos and learned where the birds had gone. He then returned to us and together the three of us took off in hot pursuit. Within 10 minutes we could hear the deep bass bongo sounds which we followed further to the west. After leading us for perhaps 100 yards, the bird stopped and continuing his singing, we attempted to sneak up on him. We flushed the hen and the gobbler sang only once more before ceasing his singing entirely. We then got up with Marcos and Alphonso via whistling and began our exit from the morning's hunt. Before going back out to the jungle road, Marcos and Emilio took us to the opposite side of the area where we had last heard the gobbler and though we tried several times to elicit a song, we were unsuccessful. We then headed to the road for a short wait during which time we watched a pair of circling Guatemalan Grey-headed Kites, very distinctive birds with deeply bifurcated tails. Within 30 minutes of our making it to the jungle road, the truck returned to take us back to camp.

On this third morning, we entered camp to find another two birds on the skinning table. After listening to the accompanying stories: Erik called in his second ocellated gobbler at 6:55 a.m. using a combination of the loud whistle and the song while his father E.B. Jr. took his second bird at 7:50 a.m. using only the loud whistle. Later, after my second hunt of the morning, I found out that E. B. III called in his second bird using the loud whistle while James took his second gobbler at 11:00 a.m. using the short whistle and an accompanying stalk. The four hunters from North Carolina together with West Virginian James Brogan had each limited out and thought surely I too would get a bird this same morning and then we could leave and they could take in the sights of Tikal National Park a day earlier. But, such was not the case. Rather, almost immediately after getting back to camp and hearing the stories, Emilio, Marcos and I then left with a crew of four scouts for another morning's hunt. We left camp at 8:30 a.m. and returned at 2:30 p.m. which included a one-way ride of almost 2 hours duration. Our destination had been Camp Milpah which consisted of a couple of small thatched roof dwellings which were quite old and constructed in a small clearing adjacent to a five or six acre lake overgrown with water lilies. Upon arriving at Camp Milpah five or six other scouts greeted us with small branches having bright red fruit attached that they called monash. The branches were loaded with the fruit which

was about the size of the last joint of your little finger. More than half of each was seed but the fruit itself was absolutely delicious. After eating the monash, the scouts showed Emilio, Marcos and myself the general area where the pavo had roosted the night before. His roost tree was situated along the edge of Milpah's open area and adjacent to the lake. We looked about and found much scratching activity in the leaves both within Milpah's open area itself as well as to the west. We climbed a little knoll about 30 yards from the closest hut and played the song on the Cass Creek caller. We got no response. Emilio, Marcos and myself then skirted the east edge of the lake along a well used trail. The area was somewhat hilly with elevation changes of perhaps 20 to 30 feet. One hundred yards out of Milpah's open area we found some fresh scratching and heard a whistle which both Marcos and Emilio immediately recognized as a turkey. Emilio and I quickly positioned ourselves in the only area we could see up the side of the opposite hill - a shallow depression through which rain runoff made its way to the lake. We called a couple of times using the loud whistle and finally Emilio's favorite call, the honk/whistle and, eventually we did hear the birds walking on the hill above us. But, they continued to the northeast. Emilio later told Marcos that it had been two hens.

We then followed the trail still basically coursing the east side of the lake and on to the north for about two hundred yards where we came to the highest point of our trek. Upon reaching the summit, we heard a gobbler to the west. He sang eight or nine times as we eased in toward him. Noting that the trees in the area were large and that the vegetation on the jungle floor had thinned somewhat, we tried to make our way to a fallen tree which was approximately four feet in diameter at its butt end. The gobbler could not have been more than fifty yards from us. We peered over the log and the bird sang a couple more times but then shut up and we could hear two or three birds walking to the southwest. We attempted to circle and get in front of them and even set up and made a few calls - mostly the loud whistle but also a couple of songs. We never got a response. We headed back to base-camp and along the way, I saw what turned out to be an eight foot boa constrictor laying alongside the road perhaps ten feet out from the road (*figure 28*). I yelled, "alto (stop)" and motioned for the driver to back up. I jumped out to get a picture and the nine or ten guides and Emilio began yelling, "No! No!". I don't



JEB for Scott Branton

Figure 28: Boa constrictor lying in the edge of the jungle.

know exactly what they thought I was going to do but after snapping a quick picture, the snake slithered into a hole and disappeared. No other excitement occurred before reaching camp.

My third and final hunt of this third day of hunting began less than an hour after returning to base-camp. One of the guides informed Oscar, the camp interpreter, that they were hearing a bird not too far from the base-camp. Emilio, Marcos and myself loaded up for a short drive with the camp organizer, Pablo, as our driver. Pablo dropped us off near an old fence-enclosed ranch. Later, after returning to camp, EB Jr. told me that he had killed his second bird at this ranch that same morning. Within the enclosure, an area of perhaps three acres, were six thatch-roofed dwellings and/or storage areas in addition to numerous coconut-bearing palm trees and lime trees. Emilio, Marcos and I walked 65 Roman paces beyond the ranch enclosure and we could hear the bird singing to the west of the trail which coursed from the ranch. We sat down along the trail next to some trees only large enough to not bend over as you sat against them. We used the Cass Creek caller to make the loud whistle three times and the bird continued to sing. At a distance of perhaps 60 yards the bird "hung-up" and would walk back and forth all the while singing in a small area just beyond our sight. After twenty minutes of silence on our part, we made the loud whistle again and the bird continued to sing but stayed on his "singing knob". Approximately 45 minutes into our standoff, I heard something to our left. At the same time that I recognized it to be a hen, Emilio grabbed my shoulder and stated, "hembra, no". We watched as she closed to within 12 feet of our position before flying up and toward the singing gobbler. We continued our vigil until we recognized that he was going away from us, all the while continuing his singing. We then walked back to the ranch and ate coconuts until Pablo returned for us just after dark.

The fourth morning (Monday, April 21) began the last day of the hunt. Five of the six hunters in camp had already limited out with two birds each. The sole exception was the most experienced ocellated turkey hunter of the six hunters in camp - myself. Pablo awakened me at 3:00 a.m. My fellow hunters continued to sleep. Emilio, Marcos and a second scout and myself loaded up for a short drive of perhaps a mile to the north of camp before turning to the west and driving another mile where a tree laid across the road. We exited the vehicle, crossed the fallen tree and continued to follow the road for at least a mile. With each step in our journey I noted the vegetation in the road increasing such that at the point where we left the road to enter the jungle, grasses and underbrush were crotch deep. We continued our walk in the jungle for about 100 yards until we reached a low lying area having two to three inches of standing water and a barkless fallen log which was to be our listening post. Emilio and Marcos talked with the second scout and he indicated that there were three singing pavos in the area the evening before. We doused ourselves with DEET and I ignited the Thermacell®. It was 5:00 a.m. and I leaned back against a limb of the fallen tree. I felt something sting the back of my left hand when I tugged at the top of the back of my shirt. Remembering the Fer-de-Lances from camp earlier in the hunt, I had to find out what had stung my hand. Retrieving my flashlight from my overall bib, I shined the light in the direction from whence my sting had come and there growing in the barkless furrow of the limb was a pencil-diameter sized, green, spiny tentacle. I suppose it was some kind of cactus. Emilio stripped it from the tree and we continued our vigil. At 5:20 a.m. a bird began singing to the south about 150 yards. Another five minutes elapsed when a second bird sang but only once and again, he was about 150 yards from our position but to the north. At 5:30 a.m. the third bird sang to the southeast and no more than 60 yards away. It was obvious that this was the bird that the second scout was waiting to hear as he excitedly gestured to Emilio the direction. Emilio and I left Marcos and the second scout and made toward the roost site. We managed to sneak to within 20 yards of the roost tree and watched the tree leaves shake against the dawning eastern sky each time the gobbler would sing. In time the sky became bright enough to permit seeing the gobbler himself roosted in the tree not more than 20 feet off the ground. We played the song on our caller twice before he flew down to the southeast and then, as indicated by his bass bongo tones, he circled to the north and finally to the east. When the gobbler was

almost out of hearing, Emilio and I pushed toward the east and stopped in the jungle thickness at a point where another six feet out the jungle opened up and one could see for 40 yards. We sat down and began playing the loud whistle. The bird's tones became more distinct and audible within moments of our whistling. He seemed to stop at a location just beyond our visibility and then immediately after one of the Cass Caller's loud whistles, I saw movement. He was coming straight for us and clucking - more the pitch and tone of a chicken than a turkey back home. We watched as the bird came to within ten yards of our set-up. Almost at the moment Emilio tapped my shoulder and uttered, "hembra," I saw that it was a hen. We sat quietly and watched as she retraced her steps away from us and back to the gobbler. The last we heard of him, he was making a beeline in a southeasterly direction and seemed to be wasting no time. Even the penetrating bass bongo portion of his song soon melted into the jungle. He seemed to have an appointment to keep though definitely not with us. I looked at Emilio and asked, "Donde ahora (Where now)?" he pointed in the direction from where we had come. I gathered my gear and followed him.

As we approached the vicinity where we had earlier left Marcos and the second scout, we heard whistling. It was Marcos. He directed us to the south and together the three of us walked for perhaps 200 yards when we were signaled by the second scout. He had stayed with the most southerly of the three roosted gobblers while Emilio and I had worked the middle bird. This most southerly bird now seemed to be stationary and obviously on the ground. Leaving the scout, Emilio and I eased to the east and set up alongside what appeared to be a road although the vegetation was knee high. We sat on one side and the bird was on the other and about 50 yards to the south.

We called using the song and though we could discern that the bird moved from our left to the right a short distance, his song indicated that he had come no closer. We pressed the song button three more times over a fifteen minute interval and though the bird sang continuously, he did not come closer. Back home a gobbler exhibiting this same behavior would be referred to as "hung up" and on a gobbling knob. I inquired of Emilio as to whether a hill or knoll existed where the bird was singing but was told in so many words that the jungle was flat. Eventually the bird moved off to the east and all but out of my hearing. Emilio got up from our set up and motioned for me to follow him.

We circled to the northeast and then back south and some 100 yards southeast of our former position. We heard the bird again. He was headed in our direction and singing. We looked about and found nothing large enough to break up our outlines. The trees were not very large in this particular part of the jungle and the jungle was beginning to warm up considerably. We waited and the bird came to within 20 to 25 yards of us. We could not see him though we could hear him walking in the leaves littering the jungle floor. We listened as he turned and moved on to the east and when we could hear only his bongo-like bass tones, we again circled to the northeast. This time we covered more ground and more quickly than with our prior attempt to get in front of the bird. This attempt took about 30 minutes and again we wound up to the southeast of our prior location. By the time we set up, we were absolutely wringing wet with sweat. However, in time we discerned that our new position seemed to be perfect. His singing indicated that we were directly in his path.

Within a few minutes we could hear the yodel portion of his song and for just a brief moment, I caught a glimpse of him as he made his way to us. He was perhaps 30 yards from us and slowly picking his way in our direction. Neither Emilio nor I made a sound.

Over the next five minutes the bird closed the distance to within 8 to 10 yards. He was directly opposite what appeared to be a recently fallen tree. We were unable to see him due to the foliage of this one fallen tree and he was continuing to walk to our left, the west. I decided to press the song button. I did and he stopped and continued to sing. I pressed the song button a second time and he continued to sing but from the same spot. He was not moving. I pressed the loud whistle button and he never missed a beat in terms of his own singing but again, he stayed in the same spot.

Off in the distance Emilio and I could hear Marcos and the second scout beckoning us. Emilio motioned for me to attempt to crawl on the ground around the top of the tree and see if I could see the bird. I did but I got no more than six feet when two birds - jay-like in appearance - landed in the trees above me. Almost immediately upon landing they began vocalizing what sounded similar to vocalizations made by blue jays back home and with their calling the turkey hushed immediately. With the jays continuing in their calling, I raised up and looked about. Our turkey had disappeared and was not to be seen or heard again.

Emilio and I left the bird at 9:30 a.m. and headed back. Marcos and Emilio whistled to one another until we met back up with Marcos. They then whistled to the second scout who was waiting where we had originally departed when the singing had commenced just before daylight. Finally, we all walked up the road toward where we had left the vehicle at the fallen tree. Within 100 yards of the vehicle, we came upon Pablo, his young son and a couple of others from camp who had found a monash tree. They had cut the 6 inch diameter tree down across the road and were collecting the monash fruit from it. We all feasted on the bright red jungle delicacy and even picked up the fruit that had fallen off the limbs and onto the ground when the tree fell. Afterward we walked to the truck and drove back to camp where a hearty meal of turkey, refried beans, rice and tortillas was served.

By 1:00 p.m. I had drunk a gallon of water, a soda and a couple of Gallo beers. I was beginning to feel rejuvenated, even ready for the last hunt of the day. At 2:00 p.m. Lovett as well was feeling his oats, so to speak, and told me that he felt that I had indeed gotten my money's worth on this hunt. Further, he said that I had suffered sufficiently and that he had instructed the guides and scouts to take me to where callable birds were for this my last hunt. Jesse too wanted to go, to film the hunt. After all, he had finished his hunts for the ocellated turkey on the first day and he had amply caught up on his sleep. Together with Marcos, Emilio, Alphonso, Mainor, Yomoni and a half dozen other scouts, we set out for "a little place, only about 4 km away." I should have been tipped by the fact that we were leaving at 2:00 p.m. when we normally didn't leave for the afternoon hunts until 3:00 p.m. but I'll have to plead dehydration of the brain - I didn't put it all together.

We drove for 19 kilometers, past a fork in the road which indicated by placard - in Spanish - that a binational preserve was just five or six kilometers ahead. We also got stuck four times before arriving at Dos Naciones. While stuck at the fourth site, a few of the scouts began to work on getting the vehicle out while others ventured further on up the road and even others walked back down the jungle road from whence we had come. I was watching Jesse film the extrication of the vehicle when one of the guides, Mainor, who had gone on up the road scouting, came running back to the vehicle to tell Emilio, Marcos and myself that he had seen a muy grande pavo in the road. We grabbed our gear and took off behind him.

Upon reaching the place where the gobbler had been spotted, which was in a curve in the jungle road, Mainor assumed a crawling, prone position and I stayed 10 to 12 feet behind with Jesse filming from behind me. We moved up the road for 30 or 40 yards when Mainor signaled to go back. Though we were never told, apparently the bird left the road and went into the jungle. Emilio, Marcos and a couple of guides hastily constructed a blind in the middle of the road made of palmetto palm branches. We sat there only a couple of minutes when yet another guide approached the blind from the opposite direction, that is, from the direction of the vehicle. He told Emilio that a gobbler was in the road and singing just down the road behind the vehicle.

Emilio and I jumped up and out of the blind and ran as quickly as we could back down the road for perhaps a quarter mile. Alphonso, one of the scouts, had marked with a palmetto palm frond the bird's exit to the east into the jungle from the road. Together we listened for a couple of minutes while Emilio and I each caught our breath. Then, we heard it, the unmistakable bass bongo tones. We could not hear the end of the song and, indeed, the bird may have not vocalized the entirety of its song. We had to assume that the bird was 50 to 100 yards away. By this time Jesse had caught up with us and the

three of us -Emilio, Jesse and I- began a quiet but focused approach toward the bird. We had made it into the jungle about 60 yards when we heard the bongo tones again. They were close, seemingly within 35 to 40 yards. Looking about, we spied a large Ceiba tree with huge buttressing roots. The three of us eased in against the tree between two of the roots and on the side of the tree opposite the bird.

I removed the Cass Creek caller from my overall bib and pressed the song button. No immediate response from the bird but within 15 seconds, he sang. He was to the northeast and definitely closer to us than when we last heard him sing. I pressed the song button again and the bird sang almost immediately - he was no more than 15 yards from us and I could not see him. Suddenly, I caught movement straight in front of me and perhaps 10 to 12 yards out. It was an ocellated turkey.

I was looking at the bird from the north side of the tree while Emilio and Jesse were watching from the south side of the same tree but four feet from me. I could not see a crown on the bird's head; I could not see spurs. Could this be a hen? After all, I had already called in at least two and arguably, three hens thus far during this hunting trip, including one earlier this same morning. I let the bird pass to my right and out of sight while peering in the direction from whence it had come in anticipation of a gobbler following this "hen". Within two or three seconds of my passing on the bird, I heard Emilio say, "macho (male)" followed by, "disparar (shoot)!". Echoing Emilio, Jesse was saying the same in English, "it's a gobbler, shoot".

I suppose the bird heard the commotion or perhaps saw Jesse's silver-toned video camera or maybe both but, for whatever reason, the bird turned and headed back the same way it had come. Stepping back into my view, it was close - maybe ten yards. I still could not tell that it was a male, much less that it was a mature gobbler. I still could discern no crown and, try as I may, I could see no semblance of spurs. In another four or five feet the jungle would absorb the bird and, at least from my perspective here in the last hour of the last evening of the final day of hunting, it was the same as forever. I had to trust that Emilio and my friend peering from the other side of the Ceiba tree were indeed looking at the same bird that I was looking at. I had to trust that this bird was in fact a gobbler. Because it was so close and I wanted to do as little damage as possible to its plumage, I waited for it to step behind some xaté palm fronds. As soon as it was behind them, I pulled the trigger on the little Russian-made single shot. The bird rolled from me like a bowling ball. I was sure it was down but the vantage point of Emilio and Jesse did not provide the same perspective; they were out in a flash and on the flopping bird while I stood at the base of the Ceiba tree waiting to hear either shouts of jubilation, if indeed it was a gobbler, or muffled grunts if it were a hen. I really did not know which to anticipate. While still in my trance of expectation, I heard congratulations. I stepped from the tree and toward them and my bird - always listen to your guide and a good friend. It was indeed a gobbler and Jesse had indeed captured the shot on video - not as clearly perhaps as video footage seen on television back home of the harvest of a North American gobbler but, a video nonetheless of the harvest of an ocellated turkey in typical Guatemalan jungle vegetation. It was 5:07 p.m., the last hour of daylight and the last day of the hunt.

We stepped off the shot - 12 yards with several intervening trees, some up to 10 inches in diameter, having caught shot on one edge or the other. The bird itself had 1 and 5/8 inch spurs and weighed 10 pounds 14 ounces (*figure 29*). His plumage was in remarkable condition, he would make a beautiful mount. Jesse and Emilio congratulated me on the shot. I thanked them for cueing me to the fact that it was indeed a gobbler. I stood and reflected on my prior ocellated turkey adventures. Together with the events of this day I had completed not only this Guatemalan hunt but also the story of ocellated turkey hunting. I had called in the ocellated turkey - two mornings before from the roost - and now, with this bird, I had called one in that was no doubt headed to his roost site. Truly, with the Cass Creek International caller *el gringo cazador cantar* (the gringo hunter sings).

We walked the 60 yards out to the jungle road and sat down to await our ride. Spider monkeys entertained us from the jungle canopy until the truck arrived. The ride back to camp included only two periods of downtime owing to getting stuck. The second of the downtimes required an hour and three quarters to get back rolling. This particular incident was noteworthy in that the driver fell off into rather deep ruts which left the vehicle completely bottomed out. There was no finger pointing or harassing of the driver at all. Rather, the truckload of guides, scouts and the driver himself jumped out, quietly assessed the situation and three-quarters of them fanned out and disappeared into the jungle on either side of the road. Fireflies and flashlights beamed while hacking sounds of machetes on trees filled the night. Within ten minutes all were back at the truck. While some hand dug damp dirt from under the frame, others fashioned two foot lengths of six inch diameter trees into two inch thick boards with machetes and others scooped dirt and palm leaves into the ruts. Finally, a small hydraulic jack was used to jack up the back and front of one side of the truck. Rocks were placed under the tires and the jack was removed. Three separate attempts, with every man pushing at the rear of the vehicle, were necessary before the driver climbed the truck out of the ruts. When he did, there were loud shouts of jubilation and all climbed back into the truck. We arrived back at the main camp about ten p.m. Only Neal Eichholz, Lovett's able assistant, data recorder, camp entertainer ie., guitar player (*figure 30*) and Pablo were awake. Spur lengths, the weight, and the location of my kill were recorded. We all then headed to our sleeping huts or as Jesse had renamed ours, "el culebra anidar area (the snake nesting area)."

The following morning, the bird was skinned and salted while Jesse and I recounted the prior evening's hunt over breakfast with the other hunters. We then broke camp and left for Uaxactun about 9:00 a.m. By 1:30 p.m. we were awaiting permission to exit Tikal National Park with our birds and by three we were back at the motel.

By the end of the following day Jesse and I had arrived in Atlanta, GA. He made his connecting flight to Raleigh, NC while my last flight leg did not occur until the following day. Our birds and paperwork were confiscated in Atlanta by Customs and Border Protection officers. Two weeks later, after much wrangling - which is yet another story - the taxidermist received our birds.



JEB for Scott Branton

Figure 29: Scott Branton's second "called in" Guatemalan ocellated turkey, 1 ½ inch spurs.



JEB for Scott Branton

Figure 30: Neal Eichholz - Uaxactun-based ocellated turkey camp data recorder and entertainer