

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Soil Conservation Service
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WILD
TURKEY
MANAGEMENT
GUIDE



The wild turkey was very abundant in Oklahoma before settlement. So abundant in fact that the native Indian considered them as something for the children to practice on with their bows. With the exception of the extreme southwestern part of the state, it is believed that almost the entire state was occupied by the Eastern strain or subspecies. The Southwestern or Rio Grande strain was probably present in the extreme southwestern portion.

By 1900, with the opening of the state for settlement and the great influx of people from the east, the wild turkey was depleted because of indiscriminate hunting for food and market. Lack of hunting regulations and general disturbance caused the demise of this game bird.

During the 1950's successful transplants of the Rio Grande turkey were made in about the western two-thirds of the state. Where habitat was adequate and birds were given reasonable protection, the flocks thrived. After just a few years, a limited season on gobblers was permitted.

Stocking of the Eastern strain, which preferred the more heavily wooded areas of eastern Oklahoma, has not been so successful. For several years hatchery-reared stock was attempted. This did not prove to be the answer. When wild trapped birds became available from states to the east and south-east of Oklahoma, considerable success was achieved. After just a few years of significant increases in the population, a limited season was permitted in some counties.

At present trapping and transplanting from resident flocks of both strains is being made to increase the distribution to unoccupied areas of suitable habitat.

Mating and Nesting -Turkeys are polygamous, that is, one gobbler will mate with or serve more than one hen, sometimes up to 5. In early spring the gobblers set up ill-defined territories, and by gobbling and strutting they attempt to attract hens to their harems. After mating, the hens attend to their nest building and egg laying duties, while the gobblers hopefully continue their gobbling and strutting for sometime longer.

Clutches consist of an average of 10 eggs. Incubation requires 28 days. The period of incubation is very critical since the hen will not tolerate disturbance. If it does occur the nest is usually abandoned and re-nesting is very unlikely.

After the poults are hatched, foraging for seeds and insects begins almost immediately. The hen broods the young on the ground for the first 2 weeks; thereafter, the young are able to fly enough to roost on low perches. The young are strong flyers at 6 weeks of age.

After the breeding season which usually ends in May, mature toms retreat to live in solitude or they may join flocks made up entirely of mature males.

Population Dynamics - Turkey populations vary from year to year as do other species of wildlife. They respond directly to varying habitat, weather conditions, predation and disturbance especially during the nesting season. A successful clutch may produce no more than 6 to 8 adult birds. Normal natural attrition plus hunting will usually limit the population on ideal habitat to about 25 birds per square mile during the winter season. Many times larger flocks, 100 or more, may be seen during the winter season in choice feeding areas.

Predators - Predators are nature's way of regulating wildlife populations by removing weak, crippled, and diseased individuals; thereby assuring a healthy, alert bird to propagate future generations.

Some of the most destructive predators on nests are skunk, raccoon, opossum, snake, and free-ranging hogs. Coyotes, bobcats, fox, hawks, owls, and house cats also are probable predators on turkeys. Free-ranging dogs may also be a severe hazard in nesting area.

Habitat Requirements - (Food and Water) Wild turkey eats an extremely wide variety of foods including fruits, nuts, seeds, insects, and green vegetation. This food must be available over their entire daily range in sufficient abundance for good nutrition. Watering areas must be available within the daily range of the birds, preferably no farther apart than 1/2 mile. Turkeys are very wide-ranging birds, which permits them to use available food on a large acreage. Listed below are foods, wherever they occur, that are readily utilized by turkeys.

Forbes, Grasses and Legumes

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|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Annual cool-season grasses | Prairie clover |
| Crotons | Prickly pear cactus |
| Euphorbias | Purpletop |
| Indiangrass | Roundhead lespedeza |
| Intermediate wheatgrass | Stuves lespedeza |
| Johnsongrass | Switchgrass |
| Other panicums | Tickclovers |
| Paspalums | Trailing wild beans |
| Pokeberry | Wild millets (bristle grass) |

Woody

| | | |
|------------|-------------|------------------|
| Ash | Hawthorn | Pecans |
| Blackberry | Hickory | Persimmon |
| Buckbrush | Holly | Plum |
| Cedars | Honeysuckle | Poison ivy |
| Dogwood | Huckleberry | Sassafras |
| Elderberry | Maple | Skunkbush sumac |
| Grape | Mesquite | Sumac |
| Greenbriar | Mulberry | Virginia creeper |
| Hackberry | Oaks | Walnut |
| Haw | Osageorange | Wildcherry |

Cultivated Crops

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| Alfalfa | Mungbeans |
| Austrian winter peas | Ryegrass |
| Clovers | Small grains |
| Corn | Sorghums |
| Cowpeas | Soybeans |
| Fescue | Vetch |
| Millets (German, pearl, dove proso.) | |

Cover - Overhead cover is most important for nesting hens and for concealment of flightless young during the early part of the brooding season.

As the birds mature they rely more on their running and flying abilities. At least 10% of the entire range should be in openings which provide food as well as insects needed by the foraging young. Some of the openings may also be planted to adaptable cultivated food plots. The timber should consist of a wide variety of mast- and fruit-producing trees. Tall trees are needed for roosting.

Land Management -It is impractical to attempt to manage wild turkey on a small acreage such as could be done for quail. Turkey are sensitive to disturbances of any kind; therefore, they thrive better in more remote situations. Food supplies may be improved by several methods. Openings can be made in dense woods, choice mast-producing trees may be released, and agricultural crops may be planted to provide supplemental food, particularly, during critical late winter periods.

In an expanding flock the hunting of some gobblers is good management. It is believed that over-mature males can actually be a detriment to normal reproduction because of the possible sterility of the older toms.

Disturbance on the turkey range (especially the Eastern strain) should be kept to a minimum. Wildfires should be prevented at all times and burning of any kind should be restricted during the nesting season. Stray or feral dogs should be kept from the area when possible.

Many landowners enjoy feeding their wild turkey flocks. While this is a very noble and humane practice, it has a tendency to semidomesticate the birds. This makes them more dependent on handouts and makes them vulnerable to indiscriminate hunters. Unharvested field grains would be a good way to provide supplemental winter feed. Perhaps a better way to provide food would be to provide stacks of hay with seed heads intact. Sorghums, small grains or millets would be suitable. Turkeys will scratch out food grains as needed.

Some landowners would like to improve the flock by stocking domesticated toms. This practice is not recommended as it will make the birds less wild and make them more susceptible to predation.

Wild turkeys ranging where chickens and domesticated turkeys are present are susceptible to diseases such as coccidiosis, blackhead, and fowl cholera.