Managing for Eastern Wild Turkey MFEWT022604

DESCRIPTION: Adult gobblers weigh between 17-21 pounds while hens weigh 8-11 pounds. Gobblers have a beard composed of modified feathers. Densities range from a few to about 30 turkeys per square mile.

REPRODUCTION: Gobblers may breed multiple hens during the spring. After hens are bred, they lay about an egg a day for approximately 2 weeks. After the last egg is laid, she incubates the nest for the next 28 days. Poults hatch together and leave the nest with the brood hen. Poults can fly to roost after about two weeks.

PREFERRED HABITAT TYPES: Areas with the highest turkey densities frequently contain mature bottomland hardwoods, older aged pine stands and 15-30% permanent openings. Permanent openings, including fallow fields, young pine plantations, utility rights-of-way and food plots, provide crucial nesting and brood habitat in the spring and summer months. Upland pine stands that have been prescribe burned are generally preferred over unburned areas due to the higher percentage of forbs present and greater insect abundance. Home ranges of adult wild turkeys range from 200 to 1,100 acres depending on forage availability throughout the year. Brood ranges vary from 100-250 acres.

DIET: Turkeys are opportunistic omnivores feeding on what is seasonably available. The wild turkey's diet is approximately 75% plant matter and 25% animal matter over the course of a year. Plant matter includes hard mast (acorns), soft mast (blackberries, etc.), grass and forbs. Animal matter is composed of insects, particularly grasshoppers, snails, beetles, spiders and ants. Turkey poults are particularly dependent on insects due to the insect's high protein content and the poult's rapid growth.

DISEASES: Avian pox and histomoniasis are the two primary diseases affecting turkey populations, although salmonellosis and mycoplasmosis may also affect populations. Turkeys are also infested with a variety of external and internal parasites such as ticks, mites, lice, trematodes and cestodes.

MANAGEMENT OF OPENINGS: Openings interspersed among forest ecosystems greatly enhance habitat for turkeys. Non-forested openings of forbs, grasses and bare ground provide an abundance of seeds, insects and succulent forage, and are used by turkeys year round. Approximately 10% of the total acreage should be in some type of opening: pastures, fields, cropland, orchards, logging decks, roadsides, utility rights-of-way or wide bladed firebreaks. A property may contain up to 50% of the acreage in openings and still have suitable turkey habitat.
Although there is no evidence that openings increase population size, observations indicate that turkeys use openings in greater proportion than they are available. When deciding where to establish and how to manage openings, consider location, size and maintenance.

- Before creating openings, inventory existing ones. Roadsides, utility rights-of-way, old fields, firelanes and logging decks can provide excellent habitat and are suitable for developing low cost openings. Evaluate openings on adjacent properties before developing new ones.

- Select locations with adequate soil fertility, drainage and adequate sunlight for plant growth. Screen openings from a public road to prevent or minimize poaching. If possible, select locations with controlled access. In areas with excessive traffic, turkey use is minimal.

- Openings should be between 1-10 acres. Larger openings will benefit turkeys but it is better to have numerous smaller openings. Maintain at least 10% of a managed area in openings, however, optimal turkey habitat can have as much as 40%. In forest habitats, 5-7 acres of openings per 100 acres significantly improve habitat and 10-15 acres is ideal if compatible with land-use goals.

- Maintain openings by burning or disking every 2 - 3 years in the winter before spring green-up. Do not disturb openings during the nesting season. Broods favor openings with vegetation maintained at a height between ankle and knee high. Hens select openings for nesting that have not been disturbed for 2 - 3 years. To minimize the workload and create a diversity of habitats, disturb 1/3 to ½ of openings annually.

PINE MANAGEMENT: Mature pine stands provide good turkey habitat. Pine timber stands should be on a rotation of 40-60 years. Keep harvested areas small, preferably less than 100 acres and irregularly shaped. Retain Streamside Management Zones to improve year-round suitability.

Conduct prescribed burns as early as possible, usually around 10 years of age. Burning on a 3 – 5 year rotation improves palatability and nutritional level of herbaceous plants and helps maintain an open understory. Thinning at least twice during the rotation reduces canopy closure and opens the stand up tosunlight. Short rotation pine management does not promote wild turkey habitat, however managing for sawtimber does provide potential for good turkey habitat.

HARDWOOD MANAGEMENT: Hardwood forests are important to turkeys, especially oak-dominated forests. Hardwood forests managed on long rotations (60-100 years) provide excellent turkey habitat.

Manage hardwood forests for diversity among mast producing trees. Select both hard and soft mast trees. Select cuts enhance mast production of selected trees by eliminating competition. Limit clearcuts to 50 acres. Thinning between 20-35 years helps get it back into mast production.

MIXED PINE-HARDWOOD MANAGEMENT: Mixed forest stands provide excellent turkey habitat. Manage these stands on long rotations. Limit harvesting to thinning or shelterwood regeneration. Prescribed burns promote and maintain herbaceous and shrub plant communities. Retain mid-story trees such as dogwood and black gum.

Photo Credit: Bobby Dean

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