



Swamp Turkeys

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The wild turkey thrives in many habitat types throughout Alabama. From the Appalachian Mountains south to the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, turkeys have adapted to specific habitats and changes to landscapes for thousands of years. The diversity of these ranges is numerous and turkeys do well in most areas. Perhaps the management and hunting of this great game bird poses no greater challenge than in the habitats of the river swamp.

Nearly all biologists agree that the most critical time of the year for turkey populations is the spring and summer nesting and brood-rearing seasons. Even under optimum habitat conditions, losses from spring poults to fall jakes or jennies are high (around 70 percent). Nest depredation, predation to broods, and the poults' exposure to inclement weather conditions account for other losses.

When discussing swamp turkeys, losses from floodwater must also be considered. Contrary to a belief held by some people, turkeys do nest and raise broods in floodplain regions of the state. Even though floodwater takes its toll on

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nesting attempts occasionally, population data indicates high turkey numbers are generally found in bottomland hardwoods.

Since many river/swamp areas encompass thousands of contiguous

acres, brood habitat should be managed similar to upland sites. Some of the ingredients for optimum brood habitat management include planting, maintaining, and retaining mast producing trees; conducting prescribed fire in mixed pine/hardwood for habitat enhancement; thinning stands to allow sunlight to the forest floor to aid in the germination of native forage and cover plants; and providing warm and cool season forages in wildlife openings, especially in linear openings (roads).

Although there has not been extensive research done on turkey movements during high water periods, some studies have shown that nests and newly hatched poults are the most at risk. Sometimes hens will delay nesting or may not nest at all due to flooding. Nevertheless, most bottomland hardwoods are considered prime turkey habitat.

The numerous and diverse array of acorn producing oaks found in most river swamps are extremely important to a wild turkey's diet in the fall and winter. Fat reserves from acorns provide energy needed for the spring gobbling season. When the waters rise, so will turkeys, flying into the tree crowns to feed on buds, leaves, flowers, and insects.

Hunting turkeys in swamps can be very challenging, but quite gratifying. In bottomland hardwoods, the gobbler is more difficult to pinpoint in terms of location and distance to roosting toms than in hill country. Typically, ground cover is limited, so your approach must be done cautiously not to flush the gobbler. Also, with a myriad of creeks, sloughs, and ponds to navigate, getting on "good ground" with a longbeard can be difficult.

For those who hunt in these areas, it is important to know that Alabama regulation prohibits hunting game from floodwater or game taking refuge on any island less than 40 acres in size created by flooding or backwaters. Migratory waterfowl are the only exception. When the floodwaters rise, it may be necessary to forgo hunting until the water recedes.

For more information on wild turkey habitats and management, contact Steven W. Barnett, Wildlife Biologist, Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, P.O. Box 247, Daphne, AL, 36526 or call 251-626-5474. 📞



Photo by Tim Albritton

Contrary to a belief held by some people, turkeys do nest and raise broods in floodplain regions of the state. The photographer saw the hen leave the nest of these eggs, found within 200 feet of the banks of the Tallapoosa River in Elmore County.

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