

Wild Turkey Management



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Although many habitat management strategies are common to both white-tailed deer and Eastern wild turkeys, there are specific management practices that address the needs of wild turkeys. Some landowners have the misconception that if management efforts are focused on healthy deer populations, wild turkey populations will flourish. Landowners and land managers with an interest in managing for wild turkeys as well as deer need to be aware of the differences in order to develop productive management plans.

A broad brushstroke of general management options across various habitats typically improves conditions for both deer and turkeys. It has been well documented that prescribed fire with dormant and/or growing season burns enhances the production of herbaceous forages and removes invasive and undesirable woody plants. This is especially important in pine plantations and mixed pine-hardwood landscapes. Deer and turkeys live at the ground layer where burning is most effective. Current restoration of historic longleaf pine ecosystems has been a moving force in the importance of frequent fire and has resulted in improved habitats for deer, turkey, quail, and many other wildlife species.

Periodic thinning in pine plantations opens up the canopy, allowing sunlight to reach the ground. The combined use of fire and timber harvests has the tremendous potential of changing

poor habitat into excellent habitat. In addition, wildlife-friendly timber harvests that retain oaks and other mast producers are common to carefully developed management plans for deer and turkeys.

Another management tool that continues to gain momentum is the use of herbicides to control and eliminate invasive plants. If left unchecked, cogongrass, a non-native plant that has gained a strong foothold in some regions of the state, will eliminate native herbaceous habitat for deer, turkeys, and a host of other wildlife. In addition, the development and management of wildlife openings continues to be an important and popular means of planting warm and cool season forages for deer and turkeys. If properly managed, openings have the potential to enhance the productivity of habitats throughout the year.

Habitats managed for wild turkeys, when painted with the finer details, offer subtle but important differences in the landscape portrait. Without rehashing what was outlined as good practices for both deer and turkeys, let's insert a few ingredients specific to wild turkeys. One of the most under-managed components of turkey habitats is woods roads. When managed as wide, herbaceous, linear openings, woods roads provide an array of habitat components and seasonal needs. Most roads, unless they

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exist in a clearcut, need to be daylighted (tree and brush removal) and widened to allow ample sunlight. These roads need to be scattered throughout the property in upland and bottomland areas and vehicle use limited. A good approach is to view these managed roads as you would any other wildlife opening in terms of use and maintenance. Native grasses and forbs should be encouraged. Alternating strips of native plants and planted crops is a good strategy. For crop selections, chufa and millets in the spring and a mixture of clovers in the fall are prime choices.

The benefits of managed roads for turkeys are numerous. They provide brood rearing areas, foraging habitats, and travel corridors. Managed roads are especially important when adjacent to poor habitats. In brushy, thick habitats, roads may afford one of the most important habitat features to turkeys. Overgrown thickets that may be used as cover for deer are not used by turkeys. Turkeys simply cannot travel through these areas unless there are travel corridors such as managed roads that connect other habitat types.

Another distinction between deer and turkeys is the foraging needs in woodlands. Turkeys prefer more seeds, berries, fruits, and nuts as compared to deer. Be mindful of retaining, enhancing, or planting important trees and shrubs. These include a variety of oaks, beech, dogwoods, hawthorns, chinkapin, plum, and blueberries. Native grasses such as Indian grass, big bluestem, and little bluestem should also be recognized and encouraged.

These are just a few of the key features of wild turkey management that should be acknowledged and incorporated into dual deer and turkey management plans. A publication, *The Wild Turkey in Alabama*, is available online at www.outdooralabama.com. Published by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, it offers detailed information for landowners to develop a successful wild turkey management plan. 

Open Areas Important for Turkeys

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Turkey hunters often ponder and are amazed at where they find gobbler sign, especially in the spring. Some of the best areas for finding gobblers do not appear to be good habitats for turkeys. Appearances may be deceiving, however. Many times, hunters report hearing several gobblers gobbling in the areas of clearcuts, young pine plantations, fields, pastures, utility rights-of-way, wide roads, and other openings. So, what is it about open areas that attract gobblers?

The answer is found in the life cycle of wild turkeys and is driven primarily by the instinct of procreation. After dispersal of winter flocks, hens seek more open habitats for nesting. This is a seasonal shift from woodland habitats where foraging for fall foods such as acorns was more prevalent in movement patterns. Wild turkeys will use openings periodically year round, but open areas become a focus of use in springtime.

Gobblers respond by moving into more open habitats in the spring as well to seek out hens for mating. So for turkey hunters, the focal point of scouting efforts and listening for gobbling ought to be near open habitats adjacent to roosting habitat along rivers, creeks, and branches. Gobblers often use these openings for courtship, displaying behaviors (gobbling, strutting, and drumming) in an effort to attract hens. Openings may be referred to as “staging areas” for gobblers as they are “trolling” for receptive hens throughout their springtime home range. Also, it is important to remember that each adult gobbler began life as a two-ounce poult whose survival depended on grassy openings for feeding on insects and for providing protective cover during the brood-rearing season.

To put it in a nutshell, wild turkey survival and population growth is centered on the availability and quality of openings from spring hatch to fall flocks. Landowners and hunting clubs need to create, maintain, and enhance openings throughout their property in order to provide optimum wild turkey habitat. The most important aspect of a wildlife opening is that it is *maintained* as an opening. This does not necessarily mean planted in crops.

A wise use of limited funds should focus on correcting soil pH and periodically fertilizing, mowing, burning, and disking openings to encourage native grasses such as little bluestem, big bluestem, and Indian grass, to name a few. If you do plant crops, alternate these plantings with native plants and keep it simple with turkey-specific crops such as chufa and millets in the warm season and clovers in the cool season.

The take-home message for landowners that turkey hunt is this: If your property consists of primarily unbroken and unmanaged woodlands with few openings, and your neighbor has a balanced mix of managed forest and openings, then most of the gobbling you will hear will be across the property line. 



Photos courtesy of the
National Wild Turkey Federation