

Wild turkeys make history in Michigan

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Turkey Hunting

Wild turkeys make history in Michigan!

Spring is just around the corner, and folks are thinking about the coming turkey season, but did you know how far Michigan has really come in the turkey world?

For the first time in history, wild turkeys can be found in every county of the Lower Peninsula, plus several areas of the Upper Peninsula. In 1977, only 400 birds were harvested during the season, and today harvest numbers are over 30,000 birds! This success didn't just happen overnight, but over the last half-century.

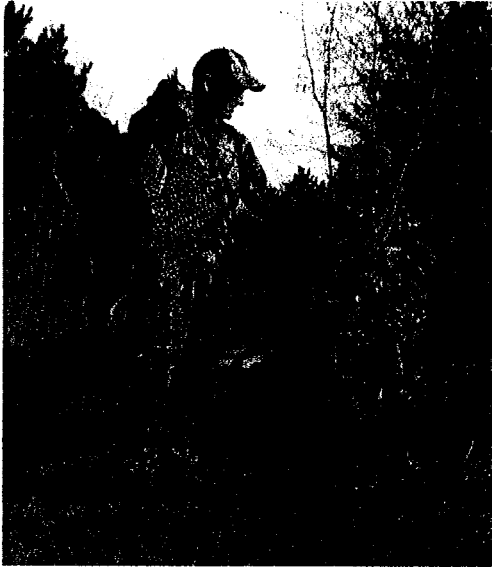
At one time in Michigan's history, turkeys were very plentiful, although over time they vanished from every county in Michigan because of unregulated take and loss of habitat. Many efforts to re-establish the population were made from 1919 through late 1983. Michigan biologists took notice of Pennsylvania's success and received birds from that state in 1954, matching the Pennsylvania habitat with an area of southern Michigan. The area chosen was the Allegan State Game Area.



Through the 1980s, wild turkeys were relocated from Iowa and Missouri to establish the southern Michigan wild turkey populations. Turkeys also were taken from southern Michigan to northern Michigan in order to help achieve the statewide success we experience today. Just getting the birds there wasn't the only concern – year-round food and cover for turkeys also needed to be provided.

“We know effective private-land management is key to turkey survival in areas that receive higher snowfall,” stated Rex Ainslie, DNR regional wildlife supervisor. “We are lucky to have great cooperation with so many turkey supporters.”

In 2013 alone, over 70 landowners – with the help of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) and the DNR – have put in over 450 acres for an annual winter food source, such as corn or other grains and crop mixes that withstand winter conditions. Crops are not harvested and are left standing through the winter to provide a food source that turkeys can reach. Although a turkey can go up to 14 days without food, trees that hold their fruit through the winter and permanent unharvested crops provide a food source that is readily available above the snow.



"With winters like we had this year," said Bob Garner of Three Corners Chapter of the NWTF, "the private-land turkey food plot program is even more important for a great spring turkey season."

DNR wildlife biologists from across the northern Lower Peninsula have been working with turkey enthusiasts such as the NWTF, Michigan Wild Turkey Hunters Association (MWTHA), private landowners and the U.S. Forest Service for over a decade. These partners have been able to adapt new techniques and maintain a high level of performance for the program.

"I would recommend this great opportunity to someone who wants to make a difference during the winter for turkeys," said Garner.

NWTF members can get grain seed for winter plots from the NWTF Conservation Seed Program, where outdated corn from large seed companies is distributed to NWTF members for only the shipping and handling fee, approximately 10 percent of the retail cost.

"This program allows NWTF members to make a significant contribution to wild turkey winter survival in the Upper Midwest," said Rick Horton, NWTF Midwest conservation field supervisor. "Ideal plots are planted near woody cover, where large concentrations to turkeys roost in the winter."

How can you get involved? Work with your local turkey hunting group, such as your local NWTF chapter.

As part of the new license structure, funding will be dedicated for public and private landowner turkey enthusiasts to create outstanding turkey habitat and hunting opportunities.

So this year, when you are out listening for gobblers, you'll know you're experiencing, first-hand, one of the best conservation success stories in Michigan history!

To learn more about wild turkeys, visit www.michigan.gov/turkey.

[Click here for a turkey target to pattern your shotgun for turkey season.](#)

Pictured above:

Photo 1: Michigan Wild Turkey Hunter Association members release turkeys in Lake County.

Photo 2: Pat and Josh McKenna harvest a spring gobbler in Gladwin County.

Turkey population and hunting tradition thrive in Michigan

May 1, 2014

The significance of it may have gone unnoticed by many, but to hunters Monday, April 21, was a big day in Michigan - opening day of spring turkey-hunting season.

Michigan annually ranks among the top 10 states in the union for wild turkey harvest - an almost astounding fact, as 100 years ago there wasn't a wild turkey to be found in the state. Though experts believe the state was home to around 100,000 birds in pre-Columbian times, the population was wiped out by habitat destruction and unregulated hunting. Today, wild turkeys can be found in every county in the Lower Peninsula and in many places in the Upper Peninsula as well.

Early 20th-century attempts to restore wild turkeys in Michigan failed to bear fruit, but by mid-century, state wildlife officials had identified the Allegan State Game Area - 40,000 acres located within a 100,000-acre mixed hardwood and pine forest - as suitable habitat for the birds. The Department of Conservation purchased 50 birds from Pennsylvania, which was enjoying some success restoring wild turkeys. The birds were released at six sites in Allegan and others were released at additional sites, including areas of the northern Lower Peninsula. Thanks to those restoration efforts, by 1964 the wild turkey population in Michigan was estimated at 2,000.

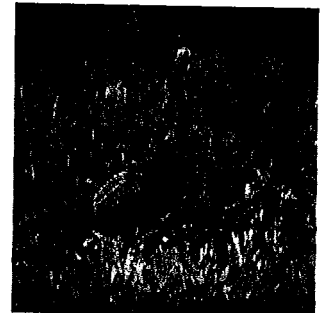
Michigan's first modern-day turkey-hunting season was held in the fall of 1965. By 1968, spring turkey hunting - the now traditional time to pursue the birds - was established in several northern Lower Peninsula areas. Now, spring turkey season is open in every county in the state and additional fall hunts are offered in areas where the turkey population is strong enough to support them.

Spring turkey hunting has grown steadily through the decades. In 1969 during the 11-day season open in two small areas of the northern Lower Peninsula, 3,200 hunters killed 50 turkeys. Interestingly enough, the areas open were outside the ancestral range of wild turkeys in Michigan, which is south of a line from Muskegon to Bay City.

A decade later, the season ran April 26-May 13, open on 4,019 square miles in the Mio, Baldwin and Allegan areas. A total of 8,982 hunters took 276 turkeys.

In 1989, the season was open April 17-May 19 on 18,682 square miles, mostly in the northern Lower Peninsula with three small areas in southern Michigan and three small areas of the Upper Peninsula, focused around Menominee County. Some 22,199 hunters killed 6,195 birds.

A decade later, the area open to hunting had nearly doubled - to 42,465 square miles - and 66,790 hunters harvested 24,973 turkeys.



Last year, with the whole state - 58,114 square miles - open to spring turkey hunting, some 104,276 hunters purchased licenses and harvested about 32,000 birds, making Michigan the seventh-highest harvest state in the country.

Spring turkey season is divided into hunt periods that range from seven days to the entire April 21-May 31 season. Hunters purchase licenses - either through a lottery or over the counter - for specific hunt units and time periods.



Some hunt units are small: two or three counties. Some are huge: the entire Upper Peninsula, for instance, or the southern half of the Lower Peninsula. Most licenses are issued under quotas - which range from 10 per hunt period (a total of 40) in the Wayne/Monroe County Unit to 65,000 in the southern Lower Peninsula (Hunt Unit ZZ), good for private lands only for the April 21-May 4 hunt.

Most importantly, anyone who wants to hunt turkeys in Michigan can buy a license for Hunt 234 that is valid everywhere in the state (except the public lands of the southern Lower Peninsula) May 5-31.

"We went from having no turkeys in 1900 to having some of the best turkey hunting in the country," said Al Stewart, upland game bird specialist with the Department of Natural Resources. "Michigan has one of the longest hunting seasons in the country. And we went from anyone who didn't draw a tag being out of luck to now, when anyone who wants to hunt, can.

"A lot of partners helped make this possible."

During the 1980s, the DNR ratcheted up its turkey rehabilitation efforts by obtaining wild turkeys from other states with similar habitat. Numerous birds were brought into Michigan from Iowa and Missouri - thanks in part to groups such as the Michigan Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, which helped pay for the cost of the boxes used to relocate the birds - and the DNR began widespread trap-and-transfer operations within the state to spread the birds around. Virtually every area where wildlife biologists thought wild turkeys could thrive received birds until turkeys could be found in appropriate habitat across the state.



"Wild turkey restoration is truly a wildlife management success story," Stewart said. "The DNR is very pleased that we've not only been able to restore a native species, but also helped develop a large turkey-hunting culture with it."

Learn more about turkey hunting and opportunities for other game species at www.michigan.gov/hunting.