

For past 34 years, Pa. Chapter of NWTF continues to be a conservation leader

Statewide organization raises \$4.7 million for wild turkey management

COMMENTARY

By Don Heckman

Wild turkey conservationist

The Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation has grown beyond the wildest expectations of its founders.

Over the past 34 years, the statewide organization has grown to 88 local chapters. And in the process, has raised and spent more than \$4.7 million for wild turkey management and research, habitat improvement, land acquisition, turkey hunting safety education, NWTF outreach programs, supporting our rights to hunt and own firearms, working on improving our public awareness, right there in local chapter areas, and statewide when partnering with PGC, DCNR, ANF, and Corp of Engineers.

Don Heckman believes, “This was not done by a magic wand or some yearly foundation grant. This was done over the years by turkey hunters getting involved, rolling up their sleeves, joining NWTF, creating and developing a state chapter in 1975, and many volunteers starting and running local chapters state-wide these past 34 years.”

Pennsylvania State Chapter founders set in place an action plan for growing the state chapter, while providing help and support for wild turkey management and research, habitat improvement, land acquisition and turkey hunting safety education. Starting in the mid 1980’s the state chapter helped NWTF grow the Hunting Heritage Super Fund Banquet and funding program, helped with NWTF outreach programs, and worked with other wildlife conservation and sportsmen’s organizations throughout Pennsylvania on future hunting opportunities and wildlife management issues.

Our organization has been blessed with NWTF volunteers willing to roll up their sleeves, get their hands, arms, and legs dirty, whether it be habitat improvement work, wild turkey management plan development, banquet organization, working on land acquisition projects, manning sports show booths, providing informational and educational turkey hunting and safety seminars, working on WITO, JAKES, Wheelin’ Sportsmen, Wild Turkey Woodlands, YHEC, mentored youth hunting, various legislative issues, and local community program involvement.

We also have had our Harrisburg – Capitol Hill and Elmerton Avenue – issues and we have taken a punch or two or three, and we have helped win a few priority issues over the years for the wild turkey and turkey hunters. A few of us have made the commitment, taken the time over the past 30 some years, to get involved in Capitol Hill legislative game law and Elmerton Avenue hunting regulation issues.

Heckman has documented and published his list of 46 major accomplishments and achievements between 1958 and 2009 that speak for the commitment and dedication to bring back the wild turkey by the PGC, the wild turkey partnership between PA Chapter and PGC, and to NWTF to “Answer the Call.” The 46th accomplishment was completed January 2008 when the PGC Board of Commissioner’s voted unanimously to remove mandatory use of fluorescent orange from spring gobbler season starting in April 2008.

Heckman further states, “I believe the most difficult issues NWTF and PA Chapter NWTF continue to have are trying to develop a growing NWTF adult grassroots membership base while trying to increase NWTF renewal memberships in Pennsylvania. Our state wide and local communications and membership programs need to improve so turkey hunters know what state and local chapters are doing in their area for the wild turkey, habitat and management, turkey hunting and turkey hunting safety”.

PA Chapter NWTF and our local chapters have a 34-year record of accomplishments for “getting the work done for wild turkey conservation.” Often the state chapter is reminded there are no crisis, no chaos, no panic in declining state-wide populations, and no critical turkey management decision to be made at the next Commissioner meeting. And granted we do not have a 450,000 state-wide, three-year stable, wild turkey population so maybe the numbers are just not there that might lead to a major crisis or bad management decision situation. Till Pennsylvania reaches 450,000 state wide wild turkey population, may never know what those crisis or major management decisions will be.

Maybe we have done all too well with wild turkey management and wild turkey populations over the past 34 years, I would tend to believe there is a lot of truth in that statement. I believe the Pennsylvania Game Commission in the past 50 years has done a tremendous job bringing back and managing the wild turkey from the brink of extermination. I also continue to believe there are far too many future wild turkey management and future turkey hunting possibilities that have been to slow in developing across this state that will need turkey hunter’s support in the next 50 years.

34 YEARS OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Listed below are some of the critical wild turkey management and turkey hunting milestones in our 34 year history.

- PA Chapter NWTF has supported trap and transfer since 1975 to move wild turkeys across Pennsylvania when the biologists have management requirements to do so. A major decision we were involved in was to support closing the PGC turkey game farm. PA Chapter did support the closing of the turkey game farm

and in 1980-1981 the turkey game farm was closed, much to the disagreement of many hunters and some PGC staff. Closing the turkey game farm was the second best wild turkey management decision made in Pennsylvania, closely following PGC management decisions to use trap and transfer as the primary management tool to move wild turkeys through the Commonwealth. PA Chapter continuing our support for state-wide wild turkey trap and transfer program run by wild turkey biologist Jerry Wunz and Arnie Hayden and many PGC officers across Pennsylvania for the next 25 years. NWTF local chapter volunteers helped out with trap and transfer during those latter years of this successful management program.

- Wild turkey biologist Jerry Wunz recommended a plan for establishing turkey management areas that got mixed support. PA Chapter NWTF supported Gerry Wunz's recommendation and finally in 1985 four regional management units were created across Pennsylvania. Over the next two decades the management areas were increased to nine, then 12, and in 2003, 22 wildlife management units were established for deer, bear, and turkey. In the larger picture of wild turkey management this was the third best management decision made in the past 50 years.
- In 1999, PGC Executive Director Don Madl signed the very first five-year PGC *Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania*. In 2007, PGC Executive Director Carl Roe signed the revised and updated 10-year PGC *Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania*. Creating and signing these management plans were important decisions made for wild turkey management in Pennsylvania for future generations of turkey hunters.
- Tireless efforts over 21 years to get Legislative and PGC support for a much needed turkey hunting license/stamp to support wild turkey management and additional revenue for the PGC Game Fund still continue today. Our PA Chapter NWTF Turkey Hunting License Values and Benefit statements have been published several times over the past 10 years, distributed to PGC Staff and Commissioners, and sent to Legislators. I believe with no crisis no chaos legislators are slow to react and act.
- The first of its kind in Pennsylvania with PGC, DCNR, and PA Chapter NWTF partnerships, TMA 7B Wild Turkey Task Force was started in 1996 when I organized and facilitated the first meeting followed by several years of twice a year task force project meetings. Today these now yearly meetings continue to review 8 PGC recommendations in order to determine when to open a now closed fall turkey hunting season. PGC brochure *Dramatic Decline In South Mountain Turkeys* on the Michaux State Forest was developed and distributed for local area use.
- The two and half year PGC hen telemetry research project, with NWTF and PA NWTF providing much of the research funding with volunteer members supporting the PGC biologist, aides, and action items from the task force action items list, resulted in a completed hen telemetry study and eight PGC

recommendations being monitored and measured today. PGC Wild Turkey Biologist Mary Jo Casalena's TMA 7B research project report was featured in the latest NWTF Proceedings of the Ninth National Wild Turkey Symposium in 2005.

- PGC state-wide gobbler leg band study between 2006 and 2009, with financial and volunteer help from NWTF, PA Chapter of NWTF, and local chapters, will provide essential field data and hunter success for gobbler harvest rates, gobbler movement, survival and banding data. This first ever in Pennsylvania four-year state-wide gobbler banding research project will also help provide factual scientific data for determining future management decisions for season lengths, bag limits, and shooting hours for wild turkey managers.
- Future first time ever in Pennsylvania PGC state-wide hen harvest rate research project is being reviewed and should be scheduled for four-year implementation in this fiscal year.
- Heckman continues his wild turkey management belief that, "as long as sound scientific wildlife management principles are followed, management and regulation decisions are made based on wildlife species management plan objectives and strategies, with field data indices and management facts, the balance between wildlife populations, wildlife habitat, hunting and trapping seasons and bag limits will continue to support PGC and NWTF mission statement".
 - "Wild turkey management decisions based on in the ground/on the ground field data, sound scientific wildlife management principles, and regulations based on field data indices, management plan facts, and not public opinions, are the best tools for managing wild turkey resources, their habitat, and turkey hunting regulations."
 - Thirty-four years of creating and publishing turkey hunting safety and ethics information and materials from NWTF and PA NWTF, with the latest *Positively Identify Your Target* PGC and PA NWTF posters, and the newest PA Edition of the *NWTF Turkey Hunting Success and Safety* brochure. NWTF produced the brochure to help support efforts to inform, educate, and improve turkey hunting safety among turkey hunters. A new hunting safety term was added to "Positively Identity Your Target and Beyond," "Think Safety – Hunt Safely" adds to the turkey hunting safety message used in our information education program.
 - Being on the very first PA State Chapter NWTF Board of Directors in 1975, Don Heckman states, "We have stayed the course since 1975 and have been involved in and achieved what is right for the wild turkey first, turkey hunting second, and the organizations third. While PGC and PA NWTF have not always agreed on all issues, we work together to find common ground and achieve results for wildlife conservation, wild turkey management and turkey hunting. Our

working together partnership has helped make wild turkey management and turkey hunting safety a model for other states to follow”.

I ask myself many times would PGC and PA NWTF been able to complete these 46 items without our partnership, without our PGC staff and NWTF volunteers working together to improve wild turkey management, increase state-wide wild turkey populations, continue to work on and improve wild turkey habitat, help create additional turkey hunting opportunities, improved turkey hunting safety information education, and continue to help open the doors for many new outreach programs for all hunters, trappers, anglers, firearms owners and shooters in Pennsylvania. I continually seek to find better ways for PA Chapter volunteers to “Answer the Call,” to “Tell the Story” and “Pass It On.”

”There is much more to do in the next 50 years for wild turkey management. The opportunities to continue building the PA Chapter NWTF foundation are endless; the challenges will be to add to those 46 major accomplishments. Over all these years, the numbers both involvement and dollars, and projects and programs, tell that story. People working together making a positive difference for wildlife conservation, wild turkey management and turkey hunting have been successful in their efforts”, reminds Heckman for those that will carry the call and answer the call for future turkey hunting generations.

All have created milestone timelines for PA Chapter NWTF and all have helped build the NWTF foundation in Pennsylvania.

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For more information about the Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Wild Turkey, please visit www.panwtf.com.