

Wild Turkey Management By The Book, Part 1

By Don Heckman

Since the early 1950's Pennsylvania's wild turkey management program as administered by Pennsylvania Game Commission has been a tremendous success story for turkey hunters. Their management plan results have increased state-wide wild turkey populations, improved wild turkey habitat, emphasized and taught safe and successful turkey hunting safety, and new turkey hunting regulations have created new turkey hunting opportunities. Today's successful wild turkey management plan has a history of one step at a time change and regulation approach.

This was not accomplished just by accident or through wild turkey CAC's. PGC "Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania" Goal is "provide optimum wild turkey populations in suitable habitats throughout Pennsylvania for hunting and viewing recreation by current and future generations". Objective: "Sustain or enhance healthy wild turkey populations in each Wildlife Management Unit (WMU) at or below social carrying capacity".

I personally preferred habitat carrying capacity as primary with social as a secondary, however I do understand what the PGC was doing by stating that objective that way. It is my belief habitat carrying capacity is the primary objective, not social carrying capacity. PGC will not know carrying capacity until it is reached or quite possibly by a steady decline in state-wide wild turkey populations impacted by other means than turkey hunting.

If at all possible a 2 week or 3 week fall season in all WMU's would be optimal. We are far away from that based on today's varied fall season lengths and the fact we are not at 450,000 stable 3 year state-wide wild turkey population. There are WMU's across the state that are accomplishing an increase in wild turkey populations; including WMU 5A which I am very familiar with the past 13 years of the wild turkey task force I started in cooperation with PGC, DCNR, PANWTF and 4 NWTF local chapters.

I believe correct wild turkey management plan sound scientific wildlife management principles are at work these past 50 years and will continue to succeed given the proper conditions throughout Pennsylvania and as long as turkey hunters continue to support the PGC wild turkey management plan. Turkey Management Areas started in 1985, were converted to Wildlife Management Units in 2003, and have provided PGC and turkey hunters with fall hunting season boundaries as defined by management plan objectives and strategies.

Hopefully turkey hunters have agreed with this management approach and will continue to support fall season wildlife management units for turkey hunting. The recently completed first ever 4 year state-wide gobbler leg band study and the soon to be started 4 year hen harvest rate study will have scientific management impacts for the next 50 years. Hopefully turkey hunters will agree to fully fund the PGC wild turkey management plan and will support a turkey hunting license/stamp for \$5 resident and \$25 for non resident license/stamp.

PGC currently manages a state-wide wild turkey population estimated to be between 300,000 to 350,000, with a high of 410,000 in 2001. Back in the late 1950's-1960's the population was an estimated 50,000-100,000 primarily located in south central and north central Pennsylvania. With this growing population, every 100+ years is not enough opportunity to fund state-wide or regional wild turkey management research projects. If turkey hunters are to expect Pennsylvania Game Commission to continue to evaluate, research, and provide optimal future hunting opportunities in the next decades a better source of revenue funding wild turkey management will be needed.

Successful wild turkey management and turkey hunting safety opportunities through the wild turkey management plan will be able to support a Pennsylvania wildlife habitat capable of supporting a 3 year, stable, state-wide WMU 450,000 wild turkey population with a 4 bird limit. Bag limits and other turkey hunting regulations will be defined by PGC Biologists, Executive Staff, and Commissioners based on correct decision making and regulation criteria.

That's the way I see it based on the state-wide populations during the 1930's, 1950's, 1970's, 1990's, and now 2009 leading into the 2010 and 50 years beyond. During these last 9-10 years my question has been and continues to be... Will Pennsylvania weather conditions, wildlife habitat and their environments, wild turkey management plan objectives and strategies, support for revenue funding wild turkey hunting license/stamp, and Pennsylvania turkey hunters be ready for the responsibilities that go with the opportunities and the demanding challenges to see that goal achieved?

When PGC turkey biologists I know wrote the plan utilizing wild turkey trap and transfer to populate other suitable PA turkey habitats in the 1960's-1970's-1980's, to start the first ever spring gobbler season in Pennsylvania in 1968, downsize and eliminate PGC turkey game farm in 1980-1981, create first ever turkey management areas for fall season hunting regulations in 1985, create the first wild turkey management plan in 1999, and then revised and updated the wild turkey management in 2006, increased 12 turkey management areas to 22 wildlife management units in 2003, estimated first time ever state-wide wild turkey population reached 410,000 in 2001, improved turkey hunting safety portion of PGC HTE course by adding turkey hunting safety section and questions in course material, created a first ever special Saturday for youth spring gobbler hunting day established by regulation one week before regular spring gobbler season starts beginning April 24, 2004, established first ever state-wide special second spring gobbler tag issued in 2006 after Legislation was signed in 2004 and regulations added in 2005, established first ever 4 year state-wide PGC gobbler leg banding study starting in 2006, established first ever Mentored Youth Hunting Program initiated in 2006 through signed Legislation for spring gobbler, squirrel, and groundhogs with turkey hunting starting spring gobbler season 2007, they did so based on the requirement to manage wild turkey population and turkey hunting opportunities by sound scientific wildlife management principles as corner stones of the PGC's wildlife management foundation.

They did so based on thorough PGC Executive Leadership and Commissioner evaluation and support to improve and change wild turkey management criteria and regulations. Wild turkey management field data, indices, hunting and harvest densities, and hunter surveys obtained over a century of data collection provide the data cement for the corner stones of that foundation.

Pennsylvania State Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation was founded and formed in June 1975 to promote wild turkey management principles, work on habitat management, educate and inform turkey hunters, improve turkey hunting safety, and grow the organization into a viable conservation organization.

State-wide wild turkey populations have increased in each quarter of the 20th century. There is ever reason to believe that will happen in the 21st century. Turkey hunters were a valuable component of that increase in the latter half of the 20th century and it is my hope they will be continue to be a valuable asset throughout the 21st century.