

Fall turkey harvest down again - Does it really mean anything?

by Lee Keck

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It has been another disappointing season for Illinois fall firearm turkey hunters. And, some hunters are concerned that disappointing results from the annual fall firearm hunt may indicate tough times ahead for spring hunters.

During the nine-day fall firearm season concluding on Oct. 29, hunter success rates were some of the lowest in several years. The preliminary harvest figures show hunters bagging a total of some 351 birds, down from the 388 wild turkeys taken during the 2016 fall firearm hunt (another disappointing season).

According to some hunters, the reduction in harvest is likely due to several years of limited turkey reproductive success during the past decade.

While this may be partly true, the lighter harvest can be most likely attributed to a long-term decline in participation in the fall hunt.

This is not just an issue for Illinois hunters. In nearby Missouri, the Department of Conservation for that state was warning hunters that this fall's hunt was nearly certain to be challenging. They said their statewide turkey production was below average due to poor reproduction and survival due to several strong storms.

Like Illinois, rainfall and flooding negatively the fall harvest increased dramatically for several years after it began.

"We undoubtedly lost quite a few nests to flooding this year," said Missouri Turkey Biologist Jason Isabelle. "Even for the nests that escaped the high water, hens that are wet during incubation give off more odor than they do when they're dry, which increases their chance of being located by a predator."

However, Missouri wildlife managers say a parallel decline in sales of fall firearms turkey hunting permits indicates that the harvest decrease is largely the result of waning hunter interest. Further evidence is the fact that the fall archery turkey harvest increased steadily during the same period.

The same may be said for Illinois hunters. With more than two months remaining in the Illinois archery turkey season, hunters had already bagged more than 300 turkeys. The total for last year's archery turkey season was 506 birds.

The unofficial figures show Illinois top five counties for turkey harvest during the 2017 fall firearm hunt were JoDaviess with 46 birds, Jefferson with 23, Williamson with 21, Wayne with 21 and Marion with 16.

Local results were equally disappointing. Calhoun County hunters bagged two turkeys, down from three last year. The Madison County turkey harvest totaled three, one less than in 2016. Greene County hunters harvested five birds – one more than a year ago. Turkey hunters in Macoupin County recorded five birds - some two more, while Morgan County hunters tagged three turkeys, down by one from last year.

The turkey harvest in Jersey County was one, compared to the same a year ago. Interestingly, hunters in Pike County had bagged only two birds, down by five from 2016.

Compared to the spring hunt, fewer counties are open to fall firearm turkey hunting. And unlike the spring hunt where hunters are limited to taking only bearded birds, fall hunters may harvest birds of either sex.

Though the fall firearm turkey hunt wrapped up Oct. 29, the Illinois fall archery turkey season continues through Jan. 14. In all local counties, the archery season temporarily closes during the two long weekends of firearm deer hunting scheduled for Nov. 17-19 and Nov. 30-Dec. 3.

The fall season does attract considerably fewer hunters. And, this may play a significant role in hunter success.

Many hunters feel fall turkey hunting lacks some of the excitement of hunting during the spring. And this year, warmer fall weather brought heavy foliage making hunting conditions much more difficult. While some fall hunters would like to credit their success purely to hunting skills, it is more likely due to the fact that birds of either sex can be taken during the fall season. The spring hunt is limited to bearded birds or gobblers.

In addition, considerably fewer counties are open to fall hunting. And, the success rate should be somewhat higher since these are counties containing the greatest populations of turkeys.

Since the fall season is open only in those parts of the state containing the densest turkey populations, virtually any open county should yield good hunting. Most years, Jo Daviess, Pike Schuyler, and Adams counties are among those yielding the greatest fall turkey harvests. But, this was not the case this year.

Even with the concerns of fewer birds next year, you can be assured that hunters will again swarm to the forest and woodlots. Spring turkey hunting has become a new tradition here in Illinois. And with the Dec. 1 deadline nearing for the first spring turkey permit lottery, most hunters are already making plans.