



Turkey time returns to the region

by Lee Keck

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There are few things more heart stopping to a dedicated turkey hunter than an unexpected thunderous gobble of adult male turkey as it approaches from the rear.

Turkey hunters are typically an unexcitable bunch. Things that will send most normal people into a panicky fit are nothing more than everyday occurrences to the average turkey hunter.

Admittedly, it takes a certain type of person to aimlessly wander through the spring woods well before daylight. I've watched many rookie turkey hunters casually stroll into a large spider web, then shout and wave their arms about as though flagging a New York taxi.

On the other hand, I've seen experienced hunters stumble over logs, fall into ground hog holes and step into a deep creek, all in complete silence, as they carefully maneuver towards a gobbling bird. Afterwards, they generally admit that the bird was one of their easier trophies.

Still, it is the gobble not the kill that excites those who truly enjoy the thrill of turkey hunting. In fact, most turkey hunters measure their success by the number of gobbles heard each day. If you have any doubts, I encourage you to ask any unsuccessful turkey hunter about his day.

"It was a great day - I must have heard a dozen different birds," is among the most common replies.

On the other hand, I've heard numerous successful hunters almost grudgingly admit that the bird they bagged was the only one heard that day.

After a long, cold winter, hunters statewide are looking forward to a dose of spring-like weather when the Illinois Spring Wild Turkey Season opens April 9 in the South Zone and April 16 in the North Zone.

In fact, youth hunters are allowed to take to the woods a week early. This year's youth season, opening soon in the South Zone, opens April 7-8 in the North Zone.

Hunters aren't the only ones that could use a break from the weather. Wild turkeys initiate breeding and nesting based on length of days, also known as photoperiod. Still, weather can and does play a role. Unseasonably cold weather can hinder the process, in much the same way weather can make hunting more difficult.

This year's outlook appears a bit better than most recent ones. A reasonable year of decent reproductive success is likely the main cause.

"Weather always plays a big role in harvest numbers and 2017 was no different," said Luke Garver, Illinois Department of Natural Resources Wild Turkey Project Manager.

“For the first two-thirds of the season, harvest trends were well above average. The significant rain events we experienced across much of the state slowed harvest considerably. Despite a rainy end to the spring season, this year marked the third consecutive season of an increased harvest total. Additionally, we were encouraged to see the youth season being the success it was.”

Weather can affect the survival of young turkeys, also known as poult. Unusually cool and rainy weather at the wrong time can have a negative effect on the survival of young birds. Recently-hatched poult are most susceptible to exposure in the days before their permanent feathers grow in.

Still, most huntable areas in Illinois contain adequate numbers of adult gobblers. A major portion of the turkeys harvested each spring are adult birds - the two and three-year old gobblers.

Last year, spring wild turkey hunters in Illinois harvested an unofficial statewide total of 15,719 turkeys, including those taken during youth seasons. The 2017 total compares with the statewide turkey harvest of 15,484 in 2016.

Hunters took a state-record 16,605 turkeys during the spring season in 2006. Now, the total number of counties open for spring turkey hunting is 100 of Illinois' 102 counties.

Most wildlife managers and veteran hunters feel a couple of really good reproductive seasons would do more good than anything else.

As in the past, the Illinois spring turkey hunt is split into five separate seasons and an early youth season. The first season in the Southern Zone opens April 9 and continued through April 13. The second season is April 14-19. The third season is April 20-25, with the fourth season April 26-May 2. The fifth and final season is May 3-10. The seasons in the North Zone follows the same format as in the South Zone but begin a full week later.

Choosing the best season is something of a crap game. Ask any five turkey hunters which season they prefer and you'll likely receive five different answers. The second season is usually the most highly sought, primarily because it offers the first weekend of hunting.

When weather is ideal for turkey hunting, the first season is often the best. With only five short days of hunting, however, a few days of wet and rainy weather can turn the first season into a complete washout.

A late spring can often make the third, fourth and fifth seasons the best. Cover is generally better at this time and nesting is often already underway. In addition, these seasons are longer and offer the employed hunter more hunting opportunities.

Illinois hunters are permitted to bag one male turkey or bearded hen per permit. The permits are issued for a specific county or special public hunting area.

The same counties as in the past are expected to yield some of the best hunting action. JoDaviess, Hancock, Schuyler and Pike counties are among the state's better turkey producers.

These counties probably hold the highest densities of turkeys. However, we also have a lot of quality hunting areas in southern Illinois, where there is more public land available to hunters.