



Turkey hunt begins soon

by Lee Keck

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Just a few decades ago, turkey time for most folks in Illinois came only once a year.

This was during Thanksgiving when we gorged ourselves on roast turkey and dressing, then devoted the remainder of the day to napping and watching football games.

Now, turkey time has a different meaning for hunters in this state. Like searching for tasty morel mushrooms and fishing the annual crappie spawn, turkey hunting has become a spring tradition throughout our local area and the entire state.

Along with news about who's catching big crappies and finding mushrooms, the number and size of gobblers bagged by local hunters has become among the chief topics of discussion each spring in coffee shops, taverns and other gathering places.

Young hunters will receive the first chance at bagging one of these birds. The IDNR's special annual youth hunting season is scheduled for March 31 and April 1, 7 and 8 statewide.

The regular season gets underway with the first segment of the southern zone hunt on April 9. The southern zone's second segment gets underway April 14, while the third segment starts April 20. The fourth segment is slated for April 26-May 2 and the fifth and final segment runs from May 3 to May 10.

Each of the north zone segments begin a full week later than those in the south zone.

Compared to the fungi and fish, wild turkey is a relatively new topic. It wasn't until 1970 that Illinois hunters had their first taste of turkey hunting. During that first modern-day season, some 1,000 hunters bagged a total of 25 gobblers from the southern counties of Alexander, Union and Jackson. Few of these birds, if any, existed in other parts of the state.

The sport has witnessed phenomenal growth since that first three-day season more than a quarter century ago. Last spring, Illinois gobbler chasers bagged a phenomenal unofficial total of 15,719 wild turkeys.

This year, all except a couple of Illinois counties and dozens of special hunt areas are opened to spring turkey hunting. Now, wild turkeys exist in huntable numbers in almost every part of the state that offers habitat capable of supporting these birds.

Typically a woodland bird, wild turkeys appear to do best in areas containing mature mast-producing hardwoods interspersed with open grasslands and crop fields.

Depending upon the time of year, each of these types of areas provide certain foods and needs. The open areas provide the necessary nutrition when forest foods are scarce. The grasslands and crop fields also offer the best nesting and brood-rearing sites.

The rapid growth in turkey hunting interest has brought hundreds of new hunters to the sport each year. This has also meant a greater demand for places to hunt

In a state where 95 percent of the land is privately owned, quality public hunting lands are a premium commodity. Fortunately for turkey hunters, a sizeable amount of the limited public lands offer a good opportunity at bagging a spring gobbler.

Southern Illinois' famous Shawnee National Forest is a prime example. Among the first areas in the state to see a spring turkey hunting season, the Shawnee Forest offers more than 250,000 acres of public hunting land in ten downstate counties. Much of this land contains prime turkey habitat.

Turkey hunting rules are fairly simple for most of these lands. Shawnee National Forest turkey hunters need only to possess the appropriate county permit, hunting license and stamps.

Free maps and additional information about these areas are available by contacting the Shawnee National Forest Supervisor's Office, Rt. 45 South, Harrisburg, IL 62946. Phone (618)253-7114.

The federally-owned lands surrounding each of the three U.S. Army Corps of Engineer lakes (Carlyle, Rend and Shelbyville) also offer good turkey hunting opportunities. Here, too, hunters must apply in advance for a county or special site permit to hunt on these areas.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers offers free maps indicating the public lands surrounding these lakes. For more details, contact the specific lake management office. For additional information, call the Carlyle Lake Management Office at (618) 594-2484, Rend Lake Management Office at (618) 724-2493 or the Lake Shelbyville Management Office at (217) 774-3951.

But, federal lands are not the only areas offering good turkey hunting. Thanks to a dedicated reintroduction program, the resounding gobble of a mature male wild turkey is now a common sound throughout many other parts of the state.

Our local area, for instance, is another hotbed for those who enjoy turkey hunting. Without a doubt, private land offers the majority of our prime local turkey hunting

opportunities. Still, there are certain public lands that have developed a reputation as top-notch turkey hunting areas.

Many of these include state parks, fish and wildlife areas, conservation areas and other state-managed sites. In many cases, these were the first sites in the county to receive initial stockings of wild turkeys.

With turkey populations now firmly established in these areas, hunters are assured of finding huntable numbers of these birds. To maintain the quality populations, hunting pressure at many of these sites is controlled through the special permit process.

Along with the regular county-wide turkey tags, the IDNR Permit Office now issues special tags for most of these sites during the regular spring turkey permit lottery. Hunters must apply in advance for a site permit and tag that for one of the four separate spring turkey seasons.

Earlier last month, hundreds of permits remained available (most for the later weeks of the season) in many counties. For additional information or to apply for a permit, see the IDNR website at dnr.state.il.us.