

Turkey hunting proving difficult

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Illinois turkey hunters are now well into their spring hunting season. And, hunting success is falling well behind last year's rate.

The fourth segment of the southern zone began April 26, while the fifth is planned for May 3-10. The third season of the northern zone hunt is slated to conclude May 2 and the fourth and fifth segments wrap up May 9 and May 17 respectively.

The spring turkey season actually kicked off with the special two-weekend statewide

youth hunt. Unofficial harvest totals showed the special youth hunts in the state resulted in 1,156 birds compared to 1,531 last year. This year, a total of 5,274 youth permits were issued, including 106 for special hunt areas.

In 2017, a total of 5,601 permits were issued.

The top five counties in this year's youth hunt follow by their harvest were Randolph (43), JoDaviess (34), Adams (33), Fayette (33) and Jefferson (33).

As of April 21 of the season, the unofficial statewide turkey harvest stood at 6,497. Though weather conditions did improve somewhat by the end of the north zone's first season, hunting success rates remained off from the previous year.

Hunters are hoping better weather will improve for the remainder hunt. Still, the entire blame for a reduced harvest cannot be placed on the weather.

According to wildlife biologists, several consecutive years of poor reproductive success has meant fewer birds are available to hunters.

"This was most evident this past winter," said area wildlife biologists. "In those locations where we typically see 30 to 40 birds were holding only 10 to 15." And, they say this situation holds true throughout much of the state.

"There are simply fewer birds this year and this will likely reflect in the harvest," they explained. "Until we see another successful reproductive year, turkey densities are likely to remain lower than we would like."

Season results thus far indicate a somewhat lower harvest in most local counties. Lying in the south zone, Madison County hunters harvested 88 birds by April 21. By the same date in the north zone, Calhoun County hunters had bagged 95 wild turkeys, Jersey County hunters had taken 74 and the Morgan County harvest stood at 59 birds.

Greene County hunters bagged 66 gobblers, Sangamon County hunters harvested 33 and 113 birds were taken in Macoupin County.

The majority of gobblers harvested each year by hunters are typically two to three years of age. This is proving to be the case again this year with fewer young birds in the population.

Experts feel that the groups of birds have broken up and hens are now seeking out nesting sites. The gobblers should be found in their regular spring hangouts.

As always, much of the hunting success depends upon weather conditions. When hunters experience cold or wet weather, the birds become difficult to locate and even harder to lure within shotgun range.

Illinois hunters are offered five separate segments (seasons) in each zone. Season dates in the north zone are April 16-20, April 21-26, April 27-May 2, May 3-9 and May 10-17. Seasons in the south zone are April 9-13, April 14-19, April 20-26, April 26-May 2 and May 3-10. Permits are issued for a particular season and indicate specific counties or hunting areas.

Locally, only Madison County lies in the south zone. Calhoun, Greene, Macoupin, Morgan and Jersey all fall within the state's northern zone. The north zone includes that portion of Illinois north of Crawford, Jasper, Effingham, Bond and Madison counties.

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.

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