

Wild Turkey Management By The Book, Part 2
By Don Heckman, PANWTF Executive Officer

Wild turkey management is working quite well state-wide these past 50+ years thanks to the PGC and NWTF biologists, PGC Commissioners and Executive Staff, and those NWTF-PANWTF volunteers committed to resource first wildlife management.

Notwithstanding recent PGC Board Of Commissioner's adopted spring and fall turkey hunting season regulation changes for 2010-2011, I will continue my series of wild turkey management articles that has brought wild turkey management, turkey hunting, PGC and PA Chapter NWTF into the second decade of the 21st Century. Additional comments will be forthcoming as I get more information and more understanding on the issues and decisions made by the PGC Board of Commissioners on April 20th, 2010.

Since the early 1900's when the estimated wild turkey population was 3,000-5,000, mostly in south central forests, and with the development of wild turkey management principles being documented and followed, our estimated state-wide wild turkey population has increased to today's 335,000-360,000.

In these past 100+ years, and more so in the past 50+ years, many new wildlife management principles and the PGC "Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania" have been developed, new turkey hunting opportunities have been regulated, and wild turkey resource first directives and attitudes rule decision maker's agenda.

These past 50+ years of accomplishments and achievements have been documented in my PANWTF articles and press releases, and have been published in "Turkey Talk". Wild Turkey Management Plan Goal and Objectives are on track for increased future turkey hunting opportunities given the successful management criteria these past 35+ years.

Much factual wild turkey management data is still missing. While wild turkey management estimates, survey data, field data, and indices are great bridges and have served PGC well these past 50+ years, there is still work to be accomplished. PGC 4 year, state-wide, Gobbler Leg Band Research project was completed during Winter 2009 with results pending distribution. The new 4 year PGC Hen Harvest Rate Research project is underway starting in Winter 2010. Much needed factual data will be collected, documented, and used for future wild turkey management decision making from these research projects. Additional factual data on turkey hunter numbers and suitable habitat densities are also needed.

In this 2010-2019 decade, more and better factual turkey management and field data needs to be collected and used in the wild turkey population model to reach future wild turkey management criteria, objectives and strategies, and future turkey hunting opportunity decision making.

In the past 50 years there has not been one wild turkey management decision or turkey hunting regulation change that has caused a problem with the state-wide population. That successful track record must be followed for the next 50 years.

I have introduced and documented several future turkey hunting ideas in my articles published in "Turkey Talk", listed on the PANWTF web site, and in PANWTF news releases. Getting from 3,000-5,000 to 100,000-125,000 estimated state-wide population in 60 years was a monumental wild turkey management achievement given the tools PGC wild turkey biologists and executive staff had in those days.

Getting from 100,000-125,000 to 325,000-350,000 estimated state-wide population in the next 30 years was incredible achievement for wild turkey management given the number of changes in wild turkey management, habitat management improvements, and new or improved turkey hunting regulations.

Actually achieving 400,000 estimated state-wide wild turkey populations once in the past 10 years has been a rewarding achievement for those having the responsibility to achieve management goal, objectives, and strategies of the PGC "Management Plan For Wild Turkeys in Pennsylvania", and those NWTF-PANWTF volunteers that work for wild turkey management, habitat improvement, and turkey hunting safety.

My latest article in "Turkey Talk", Fall 2009 edition, I continued a dialogue with an article titled "Wild Turkey Management By The Book, Part 1". That article followed the "Turkey Talk", Winter 2009 issue, "PA NWTF – 1975-2008: 33 years moving forward", that followed the "Turkey Talk", Summer 2008 issue, "Reasons to Support a Turkey Hunting License in 2008", that followed the "Turkey Talk", Spring 2008 issue, "Think Safety, Hunt Safely – meeting our commitment to improving turkey hunting safety", that followed the "Turkey Talk", Summer 2007 issue, "Accomplishments and Turkey Hunting Regulations 1958-2007" where I began a series of articles on wild turkey management and turkey hunting regulations.

In that same Summer 2007 issue PGC Wild Turkey Biologist Mary Jo Casalena published an article on "Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania, 2006-2015", all leading back to the incredible "Turkey Talk", Fall 2006 issue, with articles by Bob Eriksen on "Survey Says... A report on the 2006 PA Chapter Member Survey", Bob Eriksen's "Eriksen speaks to House Game and Fisheries Committee", Don Heckman's "Reasons to Support Hunting License Increase Legislation", Bob Eriksen's "Safety: Is it on the Top of Your Agenda this Fall", Bob Eriksen's "Pennsylvania Super Fund Enhances Habitat Statewide", and his article on "Color Phases of the Wild Turkey".

What a short history collection of what PA Chapter NWTF has achieved over 35 years and continues to accomplish in partnership with PGC for wild turkey management, habitat improvement, turkey hunting opportunities, turkey hunter safety information education, NWTF Hunting Heritage Super Fund banquets, NWTF outreach programs, and the roadmap for future wild turkey management challenges and turkey hunting opportunities.

Since day one PA Chapter NWTF has supported, been committed and involved in wildlife habitat improvement, resource first management decision making, doing our part for turkey hunting safety information and educating turkey hunters on safe and successful turkey hunting, while supporting PGC's efforts to increase state-wide wild turkey populations.

PA Chapter NWTF Board of Director's worked for a number of years on orange reduction and elimination during spring gobbler season, helping NWTF develop and distribute Turkey Hunting Success and Safety brochure, and funding much of what we have accomplished through various NWTF outreach programs, banquets, and other fund raising opportunities.

Granted in June 1975 when the PA Chapter NWTF was formed the Board stepped forward and supported closing the PGC turkey game farm, recommended and supported turkey management area proposal, recommended and continued to support wild turkey trap and transfer throughout unoccupied range in Pennsylvania.

The Board recommended, supported, and lead the charge for eliminating orange requirement for spring gobbler season with criteria and factual data supporting that spring hunting season decision, supported the development of WMUs (Wildlife Management Units), supported youth spring gobbler hunt and mentored youth hunting regulations, supported the special second spring gobbler tag, and several additional turkey management and hunting achievements as documented in previous articles.

With all that being said, the next 15-50 years will present addition opportunities and challenges resulting from the past 100+ years of successful wild turkey management. However the time span for data collection and decision making will be a much shorter period of time than decades past. Future WMU higher population densities, state-wide wild turkey population model, and habitat stainable populations will become increasing popular.

If it took 100 years to move from 3,000-5,000 regional population to state-wide 325,000-350,000 population, how long will it take to reach a state-wide, stable 3 year population number of 425,000-450,000, with either a 4 bird yearly bag limit or fall option tag for a 3rd spring gobbler? Can Pennsylvania increase future turkey hunting opportunities with a one week earlier for fall hunting season for shotgun, inline muzzleloader shotgun, archery and crossbow? Will Pennsylvania turkey hunters finally support and call for a turkey hunting license for adult resident and non-resident turkey hunters?

Can that be done? That's basically the same type questions PGC wild turkey biologist Jerry Wunz and I discussed many times in the 1980's when we were talking about reaching 200,000 - 225,000 state-wide wild turkey population goal or beyond, and how that would be accomplished. I remember talking about future turkey hunting opportunities that might be considered someday.

Back then continued trap and transfer wild turkeys into unoccupied land capable of supporting flocks of wild turkeys, Turkey Management Areas, and continued conservative fall turkey hunting season lengths and bag limit were the answers that needed to be researched and documented. That work was done successfully. Wild turkey restoration throughout Pennsylvania was well on its way and was to become one of the most successful wildlife programs PGC would undertake on behalf of the wild turkey resource and turkey hunters. One of the results of that field work and data collection was the first PGC Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania in 1999.

I believe PGC, Jerry Wunz and Arnie Hayden helped answer those questions quite well during the 1980's-1990's. With continued education from Roger Latham, Harvey Roberts, Jerry Wunz, Arnie Hayden, Bill Drake, and with continued field research, in the ground/on the ground data gathering, and educational support from current PGC wild turkey biologist Mary Jo Casalena and NWTF wild turkey biologist Bob Eriksen, those questions will get answered by the end of the 2010 decade.

Now the opportunity exists to double the 1980's population objective to 425,000-450,000 state-wide population and have incredible turkey hunting opportunities, done the right way, by the right people, by the right wild turkey management funding opportunities [by creating turkey hunting license/stamp], and always with resource first wild turkey management as the key goal for future turkey hunting opportunities and wild turkey management challenges.

Think Safety Hunt Safely / Resource First Wild Turkey Management