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Conserving roost sites helps maintain Rio Grande turkey

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Fall and winter

roost habitat may be the most critical and limited Rio Grande turkey habitat. Wild turkeys roost in relatively tall, ma-

ture trees with large crowns, spreading horizontal branches, and relatively few woody plants and tall herbaceous plants under their canopies. Open understories under roost trees allow turkeys to easily fly into and out of roosts, and allow turkeys to watch for predators on the way to and from roosts.

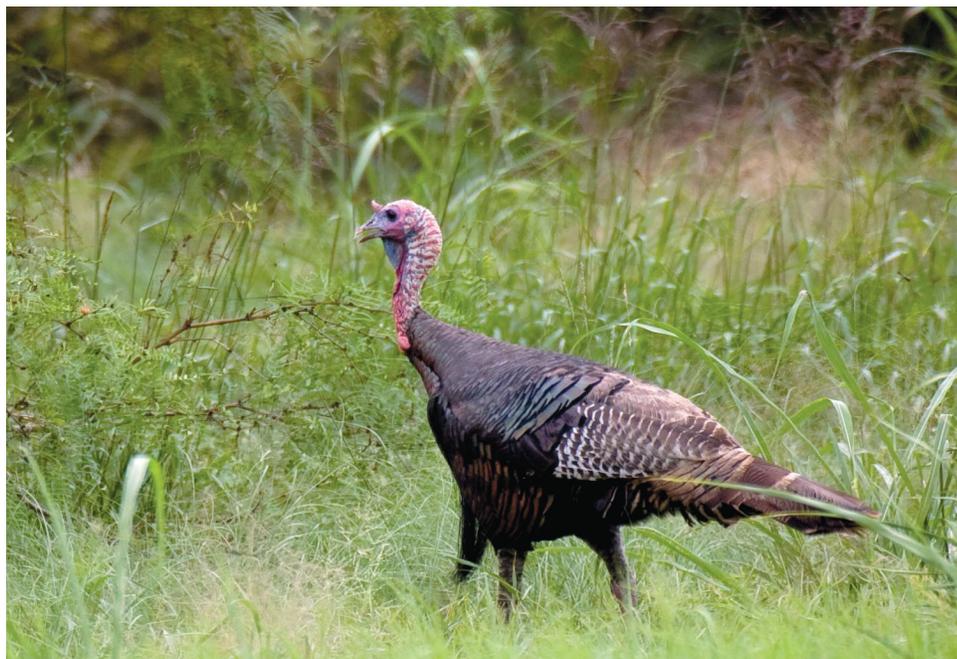
Rio Grande turkeys, the predominant turkey subspecies in most of Oklahoma and Texas, usually gather in relatively large flocks during fall and winter. These flocks typically include a few dozen to several hundred turkeys. Rio Grande turkey flocks tend to consistently use only a few roost sites during fall and winter. These roost sites are usually located in mature, wooded bottomlands, often along a river or perennial creek. Tree species commonly used as roosts include oaks, hackberries, elms, cottonwoods, pecan, sycamore, black willow and western soapberry, but species is probably less important than size and shape. In arid areas without bottomlands, Rio Grande turkeys roost in

the tallest trees available or on other structures such as power lines, windmills, buildings or oil tanks.

During spring and summer, Rio Grande turkeys disperse and use many roost sites, typically tall trees. Wild turkeys commonly range over a few thousand acres throughout the course of a year, but only a few acres of fall and winter roost sites may dictate whether the whole area has Rio Grande turkeys or not. Disturbances at fall and winter roost sites can cause the species to abandon much or all of their home range. Such disturbances

include clearing roost trees, excessive human activity in or near roosts, allowing thick brush to grow under roosts, and shooting turkeys while on their roosts.

Land managers who like wild turkeys and have fall and winter roosts on their property should recognize the importance of this critical aspect of turkey habitat and conserve it. Some upkeep may be necessary to maintain or improve roost sites. Reduction of woody plants under roosts, especially species such as Eastern red-cedar, salt cedar and yaupon, in ►



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bottomland hardwoods can enhance roost sites. Work in roost areas is best performed during summer or late spring daytime hours while turkeys are typically away from roost sites.

Burning in roost sites should be carefully considered. Fire can be beneficial or harmful to roosts depending on how it is applied. Bottomland tree species tend to be less tolerant of fire than some upland tree

species such as post oak. An intense fire, especially during the growing season, can top-kill many trees in a roost site. However, the absence of fire can allow undesirable species such as Eastern red-cedar to invade and become too thick under roosts. When a roost does not have problems with excessive shrub and small tree establishment under the tree canopies, it might be best to protect

the roost from fire. When excessive Eastern red-cedar or other woody plant establishment exists under a roost, it might be best to rake or blow leaves and debris away from most primary roost trees, and conduct a low to moderate intensity burn.

In summary, it is important to identify and conserve roost sites to maintain Rio Grande turkeys in an area. ■