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Incidental surveys yield wild turkey reproduction information

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Wildlife biologists

at the local, state and national level conduct multiple game surveys each year to monitor wildlife populations over time. However, unless

a wildlife management plan or harvest program dictates, hunters and land managers typically do little to monitor populations of most game species. White-tailed deer is often an exception to the rule because many hunters use game cameras at bait stations hoping to get a glimpse of a monster buck. But what about wild turkey? Many hunters enjoy the opportunity to harvest a mature gobbler just as much as a white-tailed buck. Just as camera surveys can inform hunters or managers about deer herd composition, health and distribution, incidental surveys for wild turkeys can reveal information about reproductive success and age structure.

Wild turkey abundance fluctuates annually, but wild turkey populations do not experience the extreme boom/bust phenomenon that is common in quail populations. The wild turkey's life span and hen's reproductive potential extends over several years, so one bad season does not mean an imperiled turkey population. Weather, predation and habitat conditions during the breeding



and brood-rearing seasons all play significant roles in reproductive success. Incidental surveys of broods, jakes and winter flock counts can be conducted to help determine reproductive success. However, incidental surveys are most useful for landowners.

Incidental surveys conducted during the spring turkey season can yield information on age structure. This can be accomplished by comparing the number of jakes (male turkeys less than 1 year old) to the number of mature gobblers. Availability of jakes during breeding season (March to May) reveals information on the previous year's reproductive success. When spring

hunting for turkeys, a Jake can be distinguished by looking at his tail feathers when he struts. All tail feathers of adult males are the same length while the feathers forming the center of a Jake's tail are longer than the rest of the tail feathers. Jakes also have short beards and spurs. Jakes and adult gobblers are used as an index for age structure of the population because the different age classes of hens look the same during breeding season. An abundance of jakes during breeding season indicates reproduction was good during the previous spring. An abundance of adult gobblers and an absence of jakes indicates reproductive success was down ▶

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last year but better previously.

Incidental surveys can also yield information on reproductive success. Most predation on wild turkeys occurs before hatching in the nest by ravens, raccoons, grey fox and feral hogs, or when poults are young. Therefore, incidental surveys can be collected in late summer with reasonable certainty that many large poults will survive to become adults. In August, poults are normally about two-thirds the size of an adult hen. If large clutches per hen are observed in late summer, then nesting success was good. If small or no clutches per hen are observed, most nesting attempts have failed. Reproduction comes from adult and 1-year-old hens.

Winter flock surveys can be used during fall and winter to look at long-term trends and distribution of turkey populations. However, they are less useful to individual landowners with relatively small tracts because winter flocks split up in the spring and move to occupy different areas during the breeding season.

None of these incidental survey techniques give biologists, hunters or land managers absolute densities or abundance of wild turkeys but, when collected over several years, can provide valuable information to make habitat and population management decisions. ■