

# Thriving turkey population greets Michigan hunters



BILL PARKER

**OUTDOOR INSIGHTS**

Standing in the middle of the dirt road, the mature tom turkey was oblivious to my approaching vehicle. At least he appeared to be.

With his tail feathers fanned out and his wings arched and dragging in the sand, this ol' boy clearly had other things on his mind — hen turkeys.

In a very nonchalant manner, he finally relocated his position on the back road and moved to the side so I could pass. But as I drove away, I looked in my rearview mirror and saw that he was heading right back to his "strutting zone" in the middle of the road.

Toms are gobbling and looking for love, at least down here in the southern part of the state, which is where I saw this bird last week. Although Mother Nature has been slow in changing the seasons this year, the late arrival of spring hasn't dampened the turkey's spring courtship rituals.

Turkeys mate in the spring. Toms establish a strutting zone — an open area from where they

can easily be seen — fluff out their feathers and gobble in earnest in an effort to attract a mate. Receptive hens see and hear this display and come to the toms to mate.

Spring turkey hunters play on this natural instinct by mimicking the calls of a hen in an effort to fool a gobble. The long line the spring is one bearded turkey (male).

Once a tom has been located, hunters set up, often with decoys and always in full camouflage, and begin mimicking the calls of a hen. Although in nature the hens normally go to the toms, hunters hope the particular tom they are calling is so hot that he won't be able to wait for the hen (hunter) and will head off in search of the source of the calls.

## Plenty of turkeys

The wild turkey population is booming in Michigan with an estimated population of over 140,000 birds statewide. With the season opener Monday, expectations were running high for another great spring turkey season.

"We have turkey numbers similar to what we had last year when hunters took 30,353 birds," said Al Stewart, upland gamebird specialist with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. "It should be another pretty good year."

"The birds are pretty well spread out, too. Birds in the Upper Peninsula are doing pretty well. In the northern Lower Peninsula, the population has done very well and remains stable; in the southern Lower, the birds are continuing to expand and are filling in the holes of available habitat."

Turkeys thrived in southern Michigan prior to settlement but were relatively non-existent in the northlands. Historical reports indicate that in 1833 William Nowlin used a wing bone call to call in a turkey near his home in Dearborn.

Turkeys were thought to have vanished from the state by the turn of the century due to habitat loss because of settlement and exploitation by the settlers, who relied on the birds for subsistence.

An aggressive reintroduction effort in recent times by the DNR and interested hunter groups has resulted in a thriving flock throughout the state.

"This year, for the first year in modern times, every county in the Lower Peninsula, including Wayne County, will have a spring turkey season," Stewart said. "There should be some pretty good hunting in Wayne County, west of I-275, and in

northern and western Oakland County. And within an hour's drive of Dearborn there is some excellent turkey hunting in the Waterloo and Pinckney (recreation) areas."

The late winter breakup shouldn't pose a major problem for hunters, according to Stewart.

"It's more of a challenge with snow on the ground, but birds do gobble in the snow," he said. "If you're hunting the first period in the U.P. or parts of the northern Lower you had better bring your snow camo."

## Keep it a safe sport

The National Wild Turkey Federation reports that spring turkey hunting incidents have decreased nationally from a high of 8.1 per 100,000 in 1991 to a low of 2.95 per 100,000 last spring. Statistically, turkey hunting is four times safer than Ping-Pong, and you are 60 times more likely to take a trip to the emergency room if you play golf.

The DNR received a record 144,000 applications for the spring hunt this year — up from 130,000 in 2000 — which means there will be hunter traffic in the turkey woods. Be a safe, smart and ethical hunter. In addition to following the 10 Command-

ments of Firearms Safety here are a few other tips to ensure a safe hunt.

■ Let someone know where you are hunting and when you expect to return.

■ Do not wear anything with the colors red, white or blue in the turkey woods. These are the colors of a gobble's head.

■ Always set up to call against a tree, stump or rock at least as wide as your back and taller than your head.

■ If you see other hunters call out to them rather than waving to them, which might be mistaken for turkey movement. Their presence has already compromised your location and a any movement may confuse or startle them.

■ Be sure you have a clear field of view to your decoys and beyond.

■ Check to be sure there are no hunters stalking your decoys before getting up and moving to another location.

## River Crab reminder

Salmon fishing is heating up in southern Lake Huron. Coho, browns and steelhead are being caught by boat and shore anglers from Port Huron north to Harbor Beach. That's good news for anglers participating in the 23rd

annual River Crab Salmon Stakes fishing tournament, slated for Saturday, April 28.

Money raised through the sale of \$10 raffle/entry tickets, and corporate sponsorships, will benefit family mental health agencies statewide. A prize of \$500 will be awarded to each of the anglers who catch the biggest Chinook, coho, steelhead and brown trout on tournament day.

In addition, if an angler registered with the tournament catches a specially tagged King salmon dubbed "Slippery Charlie" he or she will pocket \$1,000.

The \$10 tickets are good for entry into the tournament as well as a super raffle to be held after the weigh-in at 3 p.m. Saturday at Chuck Muer's River Crab Restaurant in St. Clair.

Raffle prizes include a five day, four night family getaway to Walt Disney World including hotel, airfare, park passes and \$300 in "fun money," a four-day, three-night getaway to the Best Western Wheels Inn in Chatham, Ontario; Pistons tickets, Tigers tickets and more.

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