

Setting the season

Spring turkey seasons are established according to the reproductive cycle of the wild turkey, and less on tradition and hunting opportunity

By

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"They're about all gobbled out," the old man said. "I have been scouting since the last week in March, and they were really hammering it then."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," his friend said. "Those game and fish boys really screwed up again this year. By the time the season opens, all the gobbling will be over. The season is just too late — it needs to be open at least a week, if not two weeks earlier. I don't understand why those biologists don't want to change the season."

Several years ago, I was in a country store the week before spring gobbler season and overheard a similar conversation. Two turkey hunters had fallen prey to the common misconception of "the birds all gobbled out — we need to start the hunting season earlier." Before jumping on the bandwagon, let's take a closer look at the nuts and bolts of setting spring gobbler seasons.

Set to biological clocks

Generally speaking, spring turkey seasons are established according to the reproductive cycle of the wild turkey. Other factors such as tradition and hunting opportunity also may play a role, but setting the season according to the birds' breeding cycle is the primary reason we can hunt gobblers during spring and not affect long-term population levels or disrupt breeding behavior.

With spring turkey seasons, wildlife managers try to provide hunters opportunities to kill gobblers without inhibiting the breeding success of hens, which means hunting seasons generally open the same time hens begin nesting. Setting seasons according to the biological clock of breeding hens means hunting occurs after the bulk of breeding is complete and hens are on the nest incubating most of the day.

What confuses some hunters is the fact that the first peak in gobbling activity will be over before the season starts, since it coincides with peak breeding and declines as hens begin incubation.

Biologists have learned that hunting during peak breeding can be frustrating and bad for the overall health of the flock. It's frustrating because hens are spending considerable time with gobblers, hence the expression "all henned up."



Peak gobbling activity will be over before hunting season starts because hunting during peak breeding can be frustrating and bad for the overall health of the flock.



It's bad for the health of the flock because it increases the likelihood of hens being illegally or inadvertently harvested. For example, the illegal kill of hens accounted for 34 percent of all the spring mortality of hens in Virginia and 13 percent in West Virginia. Most of the illegal kills, particularly in Virginia, occurred during the first two weeks of the season prior to the onset of peak incubation. The same could be happening in your state—at least six other studies have concluded that illegal hen kill could be significant during the spring season.

The chances of hens being accidentally or intentionally killed is greater during the mating period because hens are with gobblers and frequently accompany them when they respond to hunters' calls. Hens are much less vulnerable to illegal or inadvertent kill during the egg-laying period and least vulnerable during incubation.

Seasons set too early may have other effects on the population. If gobblers are harvested before the hens are bred, naturally, there will be fewer gobblers to go around; reproduction will suffer, resulting in a dramatic decrease in turkey numbers in subsequent years. Harvesting gobblers after the bulk of the breeding is complete helps to ensure that the wild turkey population continues to expand.

In addition, weather is generally better later in the season. The warmer temperatures also tend to spark a new round of gobbling.

Guided by principle

Wildlife agencies try to establish season dates and other regulations that satisfy the needs and desires of the hunting public, but they cannot violate basic biological principles.

Public opinion is certainly an important part of the regulation setting process, but it would be irresponsible to ignore the vast amount of data and knowledge that biologists use to formulate season recommendations.

It's hard to say when it is best to hunt. Given the circumstances of dealing with the birds' breeding and nesting periods, I prefer to hunt later in the season. Weather will likely be better and the birds more vocal. Also, fewer people are in the woods, and I have a better opportunity to watch a gobbler strut and gobble—the reason I rise at 4:00 a.m. each morning during the season.

Fortunately, most states have liberal season lengths and allow hunters to hunt over a long enough period to catch gobblers when they are most vulnerable to calling.

So, when is the best time to hunt? The answer is, obviously, every chance you get. Even if you don't hear any gobbling, nothing beats time spent in the spring woods.

When you are out there this spring, don't forget to thank your wildlife agency biologists, who set the hunting seasons to benefit the overall health of flock. It's the health of the flock that provides, and will continue to provide, great wild turkey hunting across the continent.

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*Material from the National Wild Turkey Federation.
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