

SPRING G



Jarrett Bakner, of Waynesboro, with his 2018 Franklin County gobbler.

BY JOE KOSACK

GOBBLER 2019

At a time when spring turkey hunting is drawing less of a crowd, Pennsylvania offers an almost unimaginable gobbler carryover for its 2019 spring season.

Crafty old toms, strutting 2-year-olds and even ambitious jakes are available in above-average numbers to turkey hunters willing to spend time finding and calling for them this spring.

“Low fall harvests in 2017 and 2018 – caused largely by fall food abundance that scattered birds – have positioned Pennsylvania for an exceptional spring turkey season,” explained Mary Jo Casalena, Game Commission turkey biologist. “This isn’t the season to take a rain check. Really. It could be a long time before we see another season like this.”

WEATHERING LAST SEASON

Despite recent under-achieving fall seasons, the 2018 spring turkey season harvest came in above-average at 40,300 birds, even though extensive, widespread rain and colder-than-normal temperatures plagued hunters. The state tied to produce the lowest average-minimum-temperature for May – 52 degrees – ever recorded in Pennsylvania, according to the Northeast Regional Climate Center.

Pennsylvania regions last May with the most rainfall – 6 or more inches – included the Upper Susquehanna, Pocono Mountains, East Central Mountains and Middle

Susquehanna. The state’s Southwest and Northwest plateaus, however, were only marginally above normal and consequently served up the state’s best spring turkey harvests by Wildlife Management Unit (WMU). Season-best harvests occurred in western Pennsylvania WMUs 2D, 2B, 2A and 1B. All have had increasing spring turkey populations since 2010.

“Good weather and good turkey populations generally lead to hunter success,” Casalena emphasized.

Although the number of participating hunters and days they hunted were down in the 2018 spring season, those hunters who ventured afield set the state’s second-best spring success rate: 21 percent. The best, 21.4 percent, occurred in 2001, when the turkey population hit its high-water mark and spring hunters took 49,200 birds.

A record 20,925 hunters bought second gobbler tags in 2018, up from the previous high of 20,529 set in 2017.

The success rate for those who used their second tags was an unprecedented 65 percent. The previous three-year average was 46 percent. Only 22 percent of second-tag holders pursued a second gobbler in the spring season. It compared to a previous three-year average of 34 percent.

Second turkeys accounted for only 10 percent of the overall 2018 spring turkey harvest, which is on par with the 2016

BIRDS BOOMING FOR SHINING SEASON

harvest, but 3 percent less than the 2017 harvest.

Only 6 percent of the total 2018 spring harvest occurred during afternoon hours. Additionally, during the all-day three-week part of the spring season, 19 percent of the harvest occurred after noon.

“The majority of the birds taken in the all-day portion of the season – 81 percent – came between 6 and 9 a.m.,” Casalena said. “Most afternoon birds are harvested after 5 p.m.”

The estimated 174,500 spring hunters in 2018 is up from 168,250 in 2017. Still, both pale in comparison to the previous 10-year average of 219,650 spring turkey hunters. The highest-known number of spring turkey hunters – 256,000 – occurred in 1983, the first year the Game Commission conducted its now annual Game-Take Survey.

So, even with 50,000 fewer hunters and 50,000 fewer wild turkeys afield than in 2001, and in some predominantly awful weather, spring turkey hunters still challenged Pennsylvania’s best harvest rate last spring.

“It speaks highly of the quality of Pennsylvania spring turkey hunting and the commitment of the folks who hunt spring turkeys in Penn’s Woods,” Casalena noted.

TURKEY ABUNDANCE

Measured against downward-trending hunter participation, population fluctuations, habitat losses, feast-and-famine regional fall mast crops, and the challenging influence of weather, it’s a greater chore than ever to chart regional and statewide turkey numbers.

But things appear to be positive for wild turkeys.

“The state turkey population is robust, although it might fluctuate substantially

from one year to the next,” Casalena explained. “The estimated 2018 population of 229,300 is slightly above the previous 10-year average of 220,050 and three-year average of 218,600. That’s quite an accomplishment considering 59 percent of Pennsylvania’s WMUs showed lower turkey recruitment in 2018, based upon summer-sighting surveys.”

Recent low fall harvests, spurred by continuing reduced hunter participation and substantial mast availability, have helped grow the population the past two years. Most WMUs have had stable or increasing turkey populations over the past 10 years.

Those with decreasing populations over the same period are: WMUs 1B, 2B, 2F, 3C, 3D, 4A, 4C and 4E.

Before you read too much into what you might or might not be seeing afield, Casalena cautioned, remember that turkey populations fluctuate naturally. It’s hard to measure turkey abundance without analyzing trends in turkey-harvest, summer-sighting-surveys and turkey-hunter data over time. Seasonal range changes, mast availability and even hunter pressure also temporarily can influence what you see afield.

Still, for the time being, turkeys are doing well in most areas.

“In northeastern Pennsylvania, I believe the combination of longer fall seasons – three weeks – and a three-day Thanksgiving season have combined with lower-than-average summer recruitment and declining habitat quality to cause overall turkey population declines,” Casalena explained.

“That’s why we’re decreasing fall season length; to allow a higher percentage of hens to make it to breeding season.”

Ongoing habitat improvements for grouse and other young-forest wildlife

on state game lands, state forests, state parks and private lands also greatly benefit turkeys, particularly by improving nesting and brooding habitat, Casalena said. Augmenting annual recruitment is key to maintaining robust turkey populations.

Last summer was a tough one for turkey poults. It was the wettest July on record for the Commonwealth. June was no picnic either; in the Northeast, only West Virginia topped Pennsylvania's average 5.3 inches of rain. Pennsylvania's 6.3 average inches of August rain topped all

other northeastern states.

"In 2018, poult recruitment was the lowest it's been since 2011," Casalena said. "Most August hens observed had 1.7 poults. That's 24 percent below the state's 10-year average of 2.5.

"Still, counts varied dramatically from WMU to WMU," she said. "Some WMUs had stable or increasing poult counts."

While Pennsylvania's 2018 turkey poult recruitment might have been underwhelming, recent light fall and spring harvests have stabilized most sagging



regional turkey populations. That's the take-home message for anyone thinking about going afield for spring gobblers. Weather-permitting, it'll be a memorable season.

SCOUT NOW

Finding gobblers is the key to taking a spring bird and weather often dictates where they'll be. Wintering turkeys always hang with or follow food sources. But once spring breaks and vegetation begins to grow in mid-March, flocks break up and gobblers head to their traditional breeding areas, Casalena said.

So, knowing where gobblers usually hang out in spring can be a big advantage, but only if it's a location that doesn't draw a lot of hunters. Turkeys often become harder to hunt when they bump into hunters, or they hear a disproportionate amount of turkey chatter.

"The idea is to sort out where gobblers are before hunting pressure and hen activity compel them to change their routine," Casalena emphasized. "If you learn the general gobbler age structure in an area, become familiar with what trails gobblers take, figure out what direction they enter their strutting places, you'll be way ahead of everyone else when the season opens."

Places where you've scored before in the spring season are always worth checking. Gobblers typically are predisposed to go where they've bred in previous seasons, Casalena said. And if a hunter can learn how many gobblers are around and identify them by their gobbling intensity, it'll be a big help.

"An old gobbler won't gobble as much as a 2-year-old, and if there are several 2-year-olds, they'll likely gobble intensively," Casalena said. "Jakes might not gobble at all, assuming the subordinate role they typically do."

WHERE TO GO?

It's always good to have several hunting places lined up as spring gobbler season approaches. But sometimes life gets in the way of your seasonal preparation.

If you find yourself short of what you need with the season a week away, or if you are unwilling to go where you've been spending past seasons, Game Commission turkey biologist Mary Jo Casalena has some general guidance that should help you sort out which Wildlife Management Unit might be your best bet to try.

Her data can direct you to WMUs with the best turkey populations, best hunter success rates and, if you prefer, the fewest hunters. So, consider your preferences and shop for a WMU that seems likeliest to provide the kind of hunt for which you're looking.

It might be close to home, require a trip to your upstate camp, or a two-hour ride. But if it gets you closer to vocal gobblers, it'll all be worth it.

Harvest density, shown in the top map, is the number of spring turkeys harvested per square mile over the past three years.

The statewide average is 0.8 turkeys per square mile, and all WMUs with harvest densities at least that high are shown in green.

Hunter density, shown in the middle map, similarly provides the number of hunters per square mile.

The more-heavily hunted WMUs are shown in red and those with lower densities are shown in blue. The statewide average is four hunters per square mile.

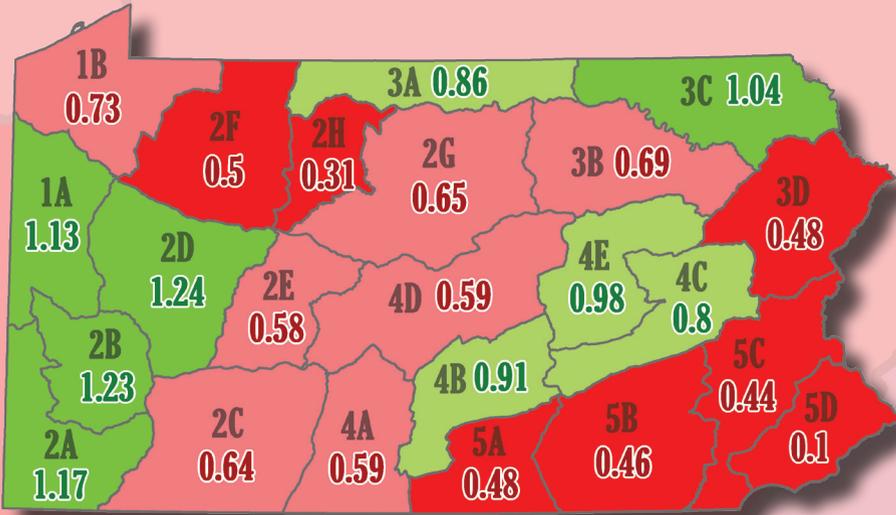
In the bottom map, Casalena established turkey population rates by comparing 2018 population statistics to the previous 10-year average population.

Increases are in shades of red or purple, decreases are in blue.

These statistics might help you plot some of your upcoming spring turkey hunts. Remember, though, these figures serve only to point you in the right direction. Fieldwork is still necessary to get closer to birds and seal the deal. Good luck out there!

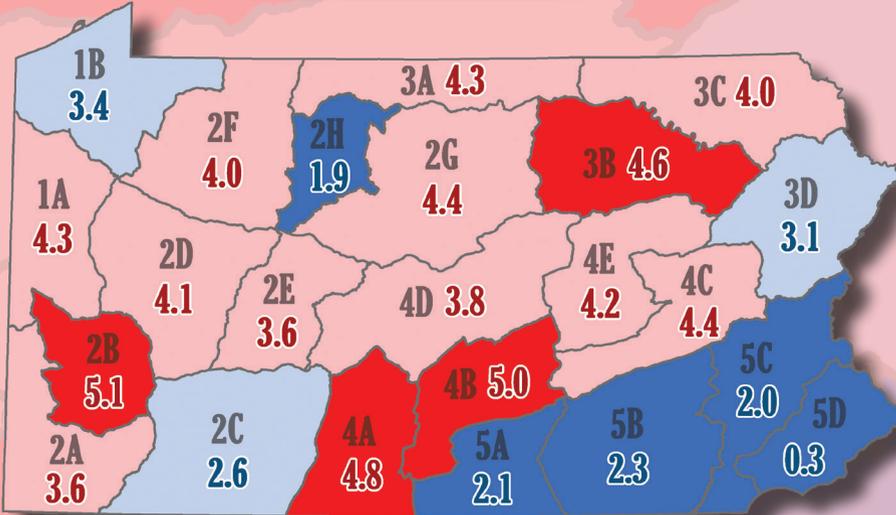
HARVEST DENSITY

Turkey harvests per square mile



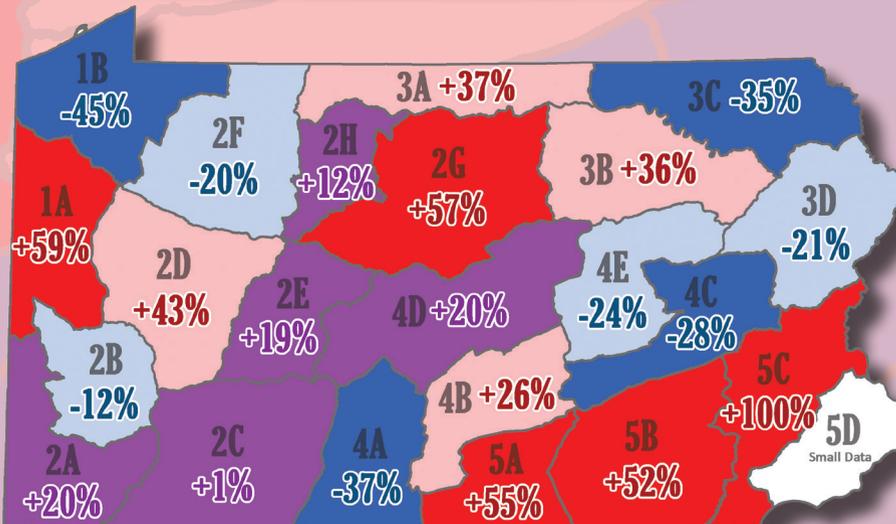
HUNTER DENSITY

Turkey hunters per square mile



TURKEY POPULATION

2018 compared to 10-year average



“But jakes can surprise you,” Casalena offered. “I’ve watched a band of jakes dominate an older gobbler several times.”

Consider locating birds using owl or crows calls. And once you get a response, stop calling.

That response lets you know you’re in the ballpark. After that, sit, watch and listen in areas that offer promise: forest openings, prominent trails, benches with mature oaks and beech.

Remain discreet. The idea is to establish hunting spots based upon turkey movements and communications.

Scouting provides the confidence you need to sit tight in an area even when gobblers aren’t hollering.

“As long as they’re not pushed away by other hunters, or disturbances, gobblers tend to stay where they are in late April and May,” Casalena said. “They’re usually where they want to be!”

Casalena said sometimes calls fetch no responses, even in areas where birds were located through preseason scouting.

“That doesn’t mean they’re gone,” Casalena advised. “Sometimes they wise up and come in quietly. That’s when knowing how many gobblers are in an area really pays off: it ensures you won’t pull out before that gobbler sneaks up to you.”

It’s also important to remember that when a boss gobbler is taken, the area’s subordinate gobblers will knock each other around until a new boss has proven itself. That could be a good situation for a second gobbler if you took the boss, or a chance for your first gobbler if another hunter did.

The bottom line is: you’ll never know what opportunities remain if you don’t scout before and in-season.

If you’re not a good caller, try to scout areas that don’t draw substantial numbers

of spring turkey hunters, Casalena said. Gobblers can, after all, be chased from areas by excessive hunting pressure. It also ensures that the gobblers called to aren’t inclined to get fussy. Nothing beats an eager gobbler.

AN EARLIER START

Pennsylvania’s spring turkey season starts April 27, which is earlier than most recent spring seasons. It will make for a longer season, though the opening week isn’t perfectly timed for hunters.

“Many gobblers will still be ‘henned up,’ because April 27 is prior to the normal wild turkey median peak incubation date range of May 1 to 4,” Casalena explained. “That means many hens will still be with gobblers, because they won’t yet be incubating their clutch of eggs.”

So, wherever there aren’t many boisterous 2-year-old gobblers, gobbling activity likely will be restricted to roost gobbling, without much gobbling once gobblers come off roost, because they’ll still be with hens, Casalena explained. That’s why it’s crucial for hunters to scout, so they’ll know where the gobblers should be and where they like to strut for hens, she said.

Rain, fog and high humidity also tend to quiet gobblers, making them harder to find. So, if you plan to go out without scouting that first week and “hunt the gobbler,” know that the earlier start and weather could influence whether you hear gobblers, Casalena emphasized.

If it’s a rainy opening week, consider heading to farm areas, or herbaceous openings on state game lands.

“In constant rain, turkeys often will go to more open areas – fields, powerline rights-of-way, logging roads,” Casalena said. “The theory is these areas away from the woods are less noisy and easier



for turkeys to see greater distances and detect predators.”

HUNTING BASICS

Some of the most basic decisions new turkey hunters make will influence whether they sink or swim. Hunting where turkeys are, sitting still and blending in matter a great deal. Patience also is critically important. Some turkeys come in quick and quiet. Others are vocally enthusiastic, but slow as a three-legged turtle. You’ll never know if you can’t sit tight, quietly and tolerantly.

It’s also worth knowing that every wild turkey you educate by hunting badly is likely one you’ll never again call in. And that’s often the upshot in spring turkey hunting: Sometimes, when you do everything right, you’ll never know you did.

Two facets of turkey hunting that often trip up hunters are calls and decoys.

Casalena likes diaphragm calls because they’re hands-free. Get at least two different ones – preferably calls emulating a raspy old hen and a young hen. Additionally, consider a box, slate or glass call with at least two different strikers.

SECOND LICENSES

Those wishing to purchase a second spring turkey license must do so before the start of the statewide season. This year, hunters have until April 26 to buy a second license. Licenses can be purchased from an issuing agent or through the Game Commission's website, but keep in mind, second turkey licenses bought online are sent by mail, and hunters cannot use them until they arrive; licenses must be held in possession while hunting. Even with a second license, turkey hunters may take no more than one turkey per day. Those purchasing a second license are required to file a report on their season success, regardless of whether they use the tag to harvest a bird.

"The idea here is to go to other calls if the first didn't get the job done," Casalena noted. "And remember, you don't have to be a perfect caller. Sounding close-enough will bring turkeys most of the time!"

Decoys are something more and more spring hunters are using, because they're effective. Casalena likes to use them in fields, along woods roads or in small woods openings.

"But if I'm in solid woods, I usually don't use decoys, because I don't want a gobbler to stop behind a tree and strut at a decoy," Casalena said.

Casalena doesn't use jake or gobbler decoys, because she doesn't want to invite the risk of pulling in other hunters.

"I hunt both private and public lands, and still don't use male decoys on either,

because I've had many hunters trespass onto private properties I've hunted."

Getting ready to hunt is as important as spending time out there. Spring gobbler hunting is demanding. So, well before the season, pattern your shotgun, get in better shape, buy a comfortable seat and line up places to go. Before the season starts, take care of obligations – seasonal chores, appointments, car and house maintenance – that might crop up in-season.

Planning will almost always provide you more places to search for gobblers and more time to hunt. It is the simplest way to get ahead, and yet seemingly the hardest to accomplish for many spring hunters. Some won't make the time, or can't be motivated; for others, it's too cold.

But it's to your benefit to start earlier, to get your prep work done before season. Then, as everyone else digs out their gear and tries to figure out where to go, you'll be looking at them in the rearview mirror.

There is no doubt, you can take a spring gobbler without much pre-hunt preparation. It's happens every year. But being ready, rather than just lucky, is what separates the best from the rest.

So, do the preseason work. Scout. And when it's time to hunt, be strategic, be still, and drop that gobbler when he comes strutting into range for you! **69**

