



Turkeys in My Woods

The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) has a firm hold on the American imagination, tethering us to the past and symbolizing a season of plenty. Today, wild turkeys number about 7 million -- up from an all-time low of 30,000 birds in the 1920s, caused by habitat loss and overhunting. This conservation success is largely due to habitat restoration and trapping and transplanting birds into suitable habitat, activities that have been supported by hunting taxes.

Wild turkey are cautious birds that can run up to 25 miles per hour (mph), fly up to 55 mph and make use of a range of vocalizations to communicate with others in the flock. For these reasons, they are challenging to hunt. Turkey populations also tend to fluctuate over time, which makes them a challenge to manage. However, it is possible to attract and sustain a turkey flock, provided you accommodate its needs.

The Basics For Turkey In Your Woods

- ✓ **Food:** Turkeys are omnivores that eat grass and forbs, especially young, tender green vegetation, as well as fruit, nuts and insects. They will also eat grain from farm fields.
- ✓ **Cover:** Although turkeys use forested areas as cover and for roosting in trees at night, they use open, brushy areas for feeding, mating, nesting and rearing their young. So a mix of open fields and pasture and forested land is essential for their survival. Turkeys tend to roost in mature, large-diameter hardwood trees.
- ✓ **Water:** Turkeys need water almost daily, so hens rarely nest far from a reliable water source such as a creek, spring, seep or pond.
- ✓ **Space:** A good-quality habitat will support one bird per 30 acres (one flock per 640 to 800 acres). But because turkeys need a lot of living space, they may not remain on your property year-round unless it's 1,000 acres or more.

Promoting Healthy Habitat For Turkeys

Activities you can do on your land to provide a healthy habitat for turkeys:

- ✓ Develop wildlife openings
- ✓ Thin your trees

- ✓ Plant mast-producing trees
- ✓ Created food plots
- ✓ Practiced prescribed burning to spur the growth of turkey-friendly vegetation

Using these kinds of techniques to managing a habitat for food, cover and water is the most cost-effective way to increase and sustain wildlife populations, including turkey flocks. Here's how to get started.

Food

Managing your property's natural vegetation is preferable—and less expensive—than planting food plots, but plots have their place in supplementing the flock's diet during stressful times and attracting birds for sighting and hunting.

Managing natural vegetation

The following woodland management activities can help to meet the special needs of wild turkeys:

- ✓ **Discing** (or “strip disking”): Disturbing the soil through shallow tillage (also known as “discing”) stimulates the growth of highly nutritious forage, including native grasses and forbs.
- ✓ **Mowing**: Mowing should go hand-in-hand with discing. Concentrate on edge roads, fire breaks and old fields to remove old-growth grasses and disperses the seeds.
- ✓ **Thinning and harvesting**: Thin your trees to let the desirable ones, such as large, mature, mast-producing and roosting trees, flourish. Also, thin the forest understory. Turkeys prefer an open forest floor covered in leaf litter for easy forage.
- ✓ **Creating openings**: Turkeys like open, brushy space and grasslands rich in forage. Grass-rich areas also provide safer nesting sites. These can be created by clear-cutting one- to five-acre patches through the forest.
- ✓ **Prescribed burning**: One of the most common tools for managing wildlife habitat, controlled burns stimulate the growth of new vegetation, especially seed-producing grasses, forbs, and legumes. They also attract insects.
- ✓ **Managing for mast**: Removing undesirable trees, cultivating desirable ones and planting mast-producing trees can all help nourish and attract wildlife. Ideally, 20 to 30 percent of your woodland should consist of these fruit- and nut-bearing trees. Turkeys love acorns and pecans, as well as dogwoods, huckleberries, blueberries, and other fruits found in the understory.
- ✓ **Planting food plots**: Follow these tips to establish food plots as a supplement to natural forage. Food plots can also be used to increase turkey sightings and harvest success.

1. Where: Food plots should be near a mature wooded area, where turkeys roost and forage for mast.
2. What: Soybean and corn are good choices because they provide food in winter, as well as specialized crops and turkey-friendly seed mixes, can be purchased through various suppliers, including the NWTF. Be sure to check with a local professional to ensure that none of the crops you plant are considered weeds in your state.
3. How much: Plant a food plot for every 25 acres of timber on your property. Plots should be one-half to two acres in size.

Cover

Many of the same habitat management activities mentioned above can also be used to improve cover for turkeys. In particular, turkeys will use areas that have been thinned by selective harvesting and controlled burns for nesting and brood-rearing.

Water

Springs and seeps are an important component of turkey habitat. They not only provide water but also attract insects and provide greens during warm months. In arid areas, developing water catchments, improving riparian habitat and installing water guzzlers are other ways to ensure a flock and adequate water supply.

Learn More

- Wild Turkey Management: http://www.forestry.alabama.gov/Publications/TREASURED_Forest_Magazine/2011%20Spring/Wild%20Turkey%20Management.pdf
- Wild Turkey Management in Alabama: <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0512/ANR-0512.pdf>
- Biology and Management of Eastern Wild Turkey: http://www.clemson.edu/extension/natural_resources/wildlife/publications/fs35_eastern_wild_turkey.html
- Native Vegetation Management for Wildlife: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs144p2_002336.pdf
- Top Ten Native Plants in Each Region, provided by the National Wildlife Federation: <http://www.nwf.org/Garden-For-Wildlife/About/Native-Plants/Regional-Examples.aspx>
- Prescribed Burning: www.mylandplan.org/prescribed-burns
- Thinning: www.mylandplan.org/thinning