

TOP

Turkey Season to Open April 15th

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*Submitted by
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Jefferson City, Missouri - Hunters hoping to bag mature gobblers during the early season should cultivate patience and watch wild turkey hens, according to the Show-Me State's top turkey expert.

Resource Scientist Jason Isabelle oversees turkey management for the Missouri Department of Conservation. Like other hunters, he has been watching the weather and thinking about how it will affect hunting conditions during the spring turkey hunting season April 15 through May 5. Those considerations go all the way back to last year's record drought.

Acorns are the single most important food source for wild turkeys in southern Missouri and other areas where forest is the dominant land cover. Waste grain is a staple food for turkeys in areas where row-crop agriculture dominates the landscape. Last year's drought caused shortages of these dietary mainstays in many areas, but Isabelle doesn't expect this to have a dramatic impact on the state's turkey population.

"The best-case scenario for turkeys is a good mast year and a mild winter," says Isabelle. "But Missouri's turkey population has dealt with mast failures as long as they've existed here. Wild turkeys are extremely hardy birds that can tolerate quite a bit of snow and cold, as evidenced by their range, which extends into Minnesota, Maine, and several Canadian Provinces. As such, I

would not expect that the winter had a great impact on the state's wild turkey population.”

Wild turkeys normally start the spring eating acorns from the previous fall. They switch to grasses, sedges, and broadleaf plants as green-up occurs. Insects are particularly important to wild turkey hens as they head into the nesting season. These are most abundant in areas with tender new plant growth. Trees are leafing out later than usual this year because of colder-than-normal weather in March. As a result, turkeys are more likely to be found in open areas that green up early. Areas where winter burns occurred are particularly attractive, because the soil is exposed to sunlight and plants sprout early.

Weather also affects turkey behavior directly. Although day length is the primary trigger for mating and nesting behavior, cool temperatures can delay the break-up of winter turkey flocks. Isabelle says reports from around the state seem to confirm this.

“Around the first of April, I was still hearing from people who were seeing flocks of 20 to 30 birds,” says Isabelle. “Hunters may see turkeys grouped up a little more than they typically would be early in the season, but things can change in a hurry when temperatures climb to more normal levels. Hunters will have better luck if they pay attention to how turkeys react to changes in weather.”

“Hunting early-season birds that are still in large, mixed flocks can be challenging but rewarding as well,” says Isabelle. “Keying in on food sources can pay big dividends, as hens will often head to these areas, dragging gobblers along with them.”

Isabelle notes that another factor, unrelated to weather, will put hunters in the field earlier in the turkey mating season this year. Spring turkey season always opens on the third Monday in April. Some years, that can be as late as April 22. This year's April 15 opener is as early as it can be.

“Temperatures between now and April 15 will affect hunters' experience during the early part of the season,” says Isabelle, “especially in the northern part of the state.”

He is optimistic about this year's spring turkey season because of strong turkey nesting success for the past two years. Production was fair to poor from 2007 through 2010, on account of late freezes, record rainfall, and cool, wet

springs. During those years, surveys showed that turkey hens produced from 1 to 1.2 poults per hen.

Turkeys got a break from the weather in 2011 and again last year, and the poult-to-hen ratio jumped to 1.7 poults per hen. Although a jump from 1.2 to 1.7 poults per hen may not seem like that much of an increase, when you consider the number of hens in Missouri's wild turkey population, an increase of that magnitude can make a substantial difference in bird numbers.

That makes 2011 and 2012 the best years for wild-turkey production since 2002. Consequently, hunters will see more 1- and 2-year-old turkeys this year than they have in quite some time.

Year-old male turkeys, commonly called "jakes," can be the easiest for hunters to fool. However, most hunters prefer to shoot older gobblers. Two-year-old gobblers are generally more vocal than young or older birds, so hunting them is exciting.

"Hunters should hear lots of gobbling this year, and they will find a lot of jakes in the woods," says Isabelle. "Overall, I think that hunters are going to be in for a good spring turkey season in Missouri this year."

Isabelle says southeast Missouri has had the best turkey production during the past two years, so hunters there should notice increased turkey numbers. West-central Missouri and the southwest Ozark Border region also have had better turkey production than other regions for the past two years, so those areas have bright prospects for the 2013 hunting season.

Northeast Missouri also had a very good hatch in 2011 and a respectable hatch last year. Turkey numbers there remain below the peak seen in the early 2000s, but hunters should notice an increase compared to the lean years of 2008-2010.

Last year's turkey production in northwest Missouri was an improvement over previous years. However, Isabelle says turkey hunters there are not likely to see as large an increase in turkey numbers as hunters in other parts of the state.

For details of the 2012 Turkey Brood Survey, visit mdc.mo.gov/node/16163.

The only change to statewide regulations is that hunters no longer are required to place the yellow "Be Safe" stickers on their shotguns, as they have been in the past. Some regulations for specific conservation areas

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and managed hunts have changed. These changes are outlined in the 2013 Spring Turkey Hunting Regulation and Information booklet, which it is available wherever h o.gov/node/4051.

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