

Gobble Up Some History...

THE FIRST WILD TURKEYS COME TO IDAHO

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by
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Within the last decade, several western states and one Canadian province helped expand the wild turkey range by introducing turkeys into areas outside their former range. Successful introductions into ponderosa pine woodlands have now been made in most western states with wild stock Merriam's or 'mountain' turkeys.

The first Idaho release of Merriam's wild turkey was made in the lower Salmon River Canyon. This release of 17 birds (13 hens and 4 toms) was made on January 14, 1961. Actual release site was at Deer Creek near Whitebird.

These birds were obtained from the Colorado Game and Fish Department who live-trapped the turkeys from wild flocks. Placed in individual cardboard cartons and flown to Idaho, they were moved by truck to the release site. Twenty-four hours after entering the trap in Colorado, these turkeys became Idaho residents.

Ranchers in the planting area were asked not to feed or encourage them to become tame as this has been a major cause for failure of turkey introductions. Postcards were distributed among ranchers, loggers, and U. S. Forest Service personnel in the areas so that sightings of birds could be recorded to aid the Department in following the success of the release.

On March 17, 1962, 11 more Colorado birds (8 hens and 3 toms) were released at Shingle Creek near Riggins. A third release was made in the lower Salmon River area at Skookumchuck Creek on March 22, 1963 when eleven more birds from Colorado (7 hens and 4 toms) were liberated.

Birds Have Become Established

Six breeding seasons have passed since the first turkeys were introduced into Idaho. Flocks are well-established in the general release areas and birds have spread to other locations.

Turkeys now occupy most of the better habitat along the Salmon River drainage from Riggins to below Whitebird. Flocks are commonly seen at Deer Creek, Banner Ridge, Slate Creek, John Day Creek, Squaw Creek, Rapid River, and on Whitebird Ridge. In addition to the main established range between Riggins and Whitebird, spread of turkeys from the Salmon River flock has been reported (1) in the Joseph Plains area, (2) north and east of Grangeville along the South Fork of the Clearwater River, and (3) as far south as the Council area in the Weiser River drainage.

Wild turkeys are noted for their wandering. We can expect movement into more distant areas of suitable habitat.

Management Of Turkeys

The Department's management program has been largely devoted to establishing turkeys in new areas of suitable habitat.

A trapping and transplanting program was begun in 1965. Since that time, turkeys have been transplanted to three new areas. The first transplant was made in February, 1965 when eight hens and two young toms were trapped at Rapid River and released at the north end of Craig Mountain near Lewiston. This flock was quite tame and at least one bird was poached shortly after being released. The Craig Mountain transplant was not successful in nesting during the first breeding season in its new home.

Eighteen birds were trapped at John Day Creek in February, 1966.

Five birds were released at the trap site to maintain brood stock for that area. Seven hens and four toms were released near St. Maries. Because the Craig Mountain flock had not been successful in reproducing, an additional tom and hen were released in that area.

Department personnel and other observers reported seeing hens with broods at both the Craig Mountain and St. Maries areas during the summer of 1966. If reproduction continues turkeys will soon be established in these areas.

Very Recent Turkey Releases

The trade program with the State of Colorado was completed recently with shipment of twelve turkeys. Idaho received a total of 51 turkeys from Colorado, exchanged for five mountain goats and 120 Hungarian partridges.

The final 12 birds arrived in Boise December 30, 1966. A release site on the South Fork of the Boise River had been selected. As winter weather had closed all roads to the release area a helicopter was used to move the birds (crated in individual cardboard boxes) to the release site.

On December 31, three toms and nine hens were freed in good condition right at the preferred release spot. All 12 of these turkeys have been seen together in the release area as recently as mid-April, 1967.

The most recent transplant of Idaho-bred turkeys took place on February 2 and 3, 1967. A total of 19 turkeys was trapped in the Joe Creek area near Whitebird and moved to the Wildhorse River northwest of Council. This transplant included six toms, twelve hens and one young bird of undetermined sex.

The Fish and Game Department plans to continue trapping and moving turkeys until areas of suitable habitat throughout the state have been planted. Careful consideration is given to the requirements of Merriam's turkeys when areas are selected for release sites. Those areas that appear to contain the best turkey habitat will be planted first.

However, because wild turkeys are difficult to trap, it will take several years before enough turkeys are captured to plant all potential areas.

At the present time, the trappable turkey population occupies the steep lower Salmon River country, where winters are not severe. Mild weather and rugged terrain often cause trapping efforts to be futile.

Good snow cover and scarcity of food is needed to make turkey trapping efforts pay off. These ideal trapping conditions seldom occur in the Salmon River turkey range. With luck, other transplant areas will provide a surplus of birds which may be captured under more favorable trapping conditions.

Hunting

Most wildlife species have a high reproductive potential and the turkey is near the top of the list. When first introduced into good habitat, turkeys often increase rapidly to peak numbers. For example, in the Long Pines area of southeastern Montana, the Merriam's turkey expanded from an original planting of 18 birds to a high of about 700 birds. This took only three breeding seasons!

Once the peak is reached the turkey population usually decreases and tends to remain at a lower level. The "carrying capacity" of the habitat regulates the population level.

When turkeys are near the numbers that the habitat can support, the annual mortality rate is quite high. Studies in Montana, New Mexico, and in other states indicate an annual loss of 50 percent of the population each year whether hunted or not. In Idaho, the lower Salmon River turkey population apparently reached carrying capacity as early as 1963 or 1964. This peak level was reached within three to four breeding seasons after the first release. There is now a surplus of birds each fall that should be harvested by the hunter.

A hunt will be beneficial to the turkey population as it will help increase "wildness" of the birds. Hunting may also help scatter the birds to surrounding areas of suitable habitat.

The Future

The Merriam's turkey has already joined Idaho's list of successfully introduced game bird species. Releases of turkeys have been made in five areas. Three of these areas have been planted with birds from Idaho's own turkey population.

Although the original range of the wild turkey was reduced by white man's activity, a number of states have recently helped enlarge the turkey range. Idaho has helped play a role in expansion of the wild turkey's range. Of more importance to many sportsmen, is that a fine new game bird has been established in the state.



Editor's note: David Neider was Regional Game Biologist for the McCall Region IDF&G when this article was published in 1967. Mr. Neider retired from Idaho Fish & Game in 1990 and currently works part-time with the Department at the Cecil D. Andrus WMA near Cambridge where he is witness to the happy result of these original plantings: hundreds of wintering turkeys!