

REPORT ON THE FIRST MONTH OF THE
SAN DIEGO BACK COUNTRY TURKEY SURVEY

2010

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The goal of the winter turkey survey is to try to establish how close the turkeys are to their breeding season. This would allow a better prediction of the way the hunting season might be expected to be. Currently they are still in winter flocks.

Additionally the San Diego Chapter of the NWTF is actively searching for new members to assist in the several activities of the chapter. Help is needed on the production of the annual Banquet; the Turkey Tune Up; the Advanced Hunter seminar; the Jakes event and manning the booths for Hunting and Fishing Day; the Safari Club International Junior Pheasant Hunt and several other events.

To encourage new members to attend the committee meetings on the fourth Tuesday of every month (at Coco's at the corner of Baltimore and Lake Murray Bvd in La Mesa at 6 pm), we offer to take prospective members into the field to be part of the survey work and show where there are high numbers of the birds as well as observe the tree talk/and gobble; the morning fly down; the establishment of dominance and pecking orders and, in the summertime, we will count the number of poults with each hen to follow the rate of turkey reproduction.

New committee members will be able to hear the nuances of live, wild hen yelping and have a chance to try out their calling abilities in order to gain the interest of huge long beards. Places that are open to hunting will be pointed out and clues about how to go about trying to ethically bag a bird will be offered. If you have interest in this type of instruction and survey work please give me a call at (760) 522 1389 so we can set up a date. Week days work fine as well as weekends. We are serious about the need to spread the work load around at the committee meetings and events.

Beginning on the morning of January 26 and ending on the 18th of February, we started counting turkeys seen along the roadways of San Diego County. From Ramona to Julian and from Henshaw to Descanso a total of 1,163 sightings of wild turkeys was made on a total of seven field days that began at 0500 and ended about noon. The birds were classified as hens (942), gobblers (111) or jakes (110). I was supported by nine observers who rode with me.

Rainfall measured at Lindbergh Field is 2 tenths of an inch above normal at this writing with new weather predicted starting tomorrow. This is well ahead of last year when a two week period of 86 degree weather made the adult hens believe Spring had sprung in January. They went right to nesting and that set off the breeding season in the jakes and gobblers. With the breeding (and gobbling) season lasting about three to five weeks it was almost all over by the time the season opened on the last Saturday in March. Further evidence of this very early start is the timing of when the first chicks appeared. We normally see the first chicks with the hens on about the last weekend of the season (May 6) but hunters were reporting flying poults (at least 10 days old) on opening day last year. A further complication that occurred was the late hatch from the previous season. This produced a lot of young jennies that were not so much interested in breeding and nesting as they were in just hanging around with the gobblers because their mothers had gone off and were sitting on nests. Since these young jennies were not producing any eggs they did not abandon the gobblers in the middle of the day as a breeding hen would. Gobblers did not have to go off looking for love because the non breeding jennies had his full attention even though they had no intention of being other than friendly but aloof. This greatly restricted the amount of mid day gobbling.

There was very little tree gobbling and virtually none at all after the birds hit the ground in the morning. Hunter frustration was high and many of them did not come back out believing there had been a sudden

drop in turkey numbers. Because we had been making surveys nearly every other day we knew that the bird numbers had not dropped. We were counting four to six hundred of them a morning. They simply were not doing the same things in the expected places as they had been for several Spring seasons before.

Instead of a two week period of brilliant southern California sunshine in January, like last year, this year we actually had snow and above normal numbers of days of cloud cover and rain. It is not likely we will see the "close mouthed" birds we saw on opening weekend of last year.

Of course we still have a ways to go so we will keep on counting and watching the weather to see how the birds are reacting. At this point we have observed only one single hen out looking for a nest site (the first sign of spring dispersal). All the rest of the hen flocks have been large (20 to 60) and the attending gobblers have not paid much attention to our efforts to get them to respond to calls. True gobbling has just become much more significant and better focused leading us to believe they have not started to respond to hens moving away from the winter roosts. Hen yelping has been almost totally lacking as well. It appears that we should expect a more normally timed spring dispersal.

The silver lining in all this is that the bag was lower and many of the birds that might have been taken as jakes are now a year older and there will be more of them. We can only hope the weather regime will stay close to normal.