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SAN DIEGO WILD TURKEY REPRODUCTION
2009

By

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Turkey hunters in San Diego normally report seeing the first turkey brood of the Spring on the last weekend of the season which occurs at the end of the first week of May. This has been the case for the sixteen years wild turkeys have been breeding in the county. Unusually, hunters in the Spring season of 2009 reported seeing flying poults with two weeks of April left in the season. While tree gobbling on opening morning of the season at the end of March was significant, midday gobbling was almost totally lacking. Gobblers would come down out of the tree and pay little to no attention to

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hunter's calls. They wandered off with a group of younger jennies and stayed with them through the middle of the day when, in normal years, they would lose their hens to their need to lay eggs and go off noisily searching for other hens. A few gobblers around the middle of the morning this Spring would remember the calling they heard from hunters while they were still in the tree and go looking for that girl. Usually the discouraged hunter, not hearing any gobbling for four or five hours, would have moved by then and were not be able to take advantage of this pretty rare event.

Two weeks of 86 degree weather in January, 2009, appears to have pushed most adult hens in San Diego into the breeding season as much as six weeks early. Since it is the behavior of the adult hens that sets off the breeding season in the gobblers, the first peak of gobbling took place at about that same time. By the time the last Saturday of March rolled around a large percentage of the adult hens had totally left the gobblers to stay with their incubation duties. The remaining younger hens, not on nests, stayed with the gobblers in heavy cover under solid over story canopies of oaks. Gobblers spent all

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day displaying to these largely nonbreeding young jennies. That means they stayed with the gobbler all day and did not go off in the middle of the day to lay their eggs. The gobbler was content to stay with these young teasers. He was quiet and loyal to his harem. In short, the season opened with most of the gobblers "henned up", something that normally occurs in about the second week of the season. Small bands of jakes formed the bulk of the hunter bag on opening weekend. These nonbreeding jennies were with the older gobblers through the length of the season and very few of the younger hunters and archers taking advantage of the late extended season afforded them were able to call and attract breeding gobblers. There was almost a complete lack of a "second peak of gobbling" this Spring.

While that was the downside of the Spring 2009 season there is still a silver lining. The lower than normal bag has produced a larger than normal crop of gobblers for the coming Fall and Spring seasons. Its also true that discouraged hunters are not as likely to turn out in the numbers they have been in the recent past.

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During nine separate scouting trips I took in February and March of 2009 we counted over four hundred birds nearly every morning and a couple of days we saw over six hundred. The importance of groups of birds all mixed up and not split to sexes or even aged flocks, as they normally are in the winter, did not occur to me. We were hearing tremendous tree gobbling and that sounded good enough. Good numbers of strutting long beards were displaying to huge flocks of hens. Turns out that many of these "hens" were in fact younger jakes with no beards. I saw one group of thirty five "hens" with only a single gobbler. In all that spring scouting I encountered only one significant group of fifteen jakes. There should have been more of them. They were there but they were just too young to be afraid of the big strutters in their midst.

After surveying well over five hundred turkeys in the past two weeks of July this summer, during four trips into the field, I have seen only one flock of ten adult gobblers. All the rest were hens and broods. Some of the broods were much larger than their mothers but none of the poults had beards. The average size of the seventy nine broods

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surveyed was three point four poults. There was only one hen that had only one chick. There were even two hens with non flying, downy young on the last week of July. The largest brood had seven in it and many poults were larger than their mothers. There were several flocks of hens and poults in the thirty five to forty bird size. They are already banding up. All the surveys were run in the Wynola to Pine Hills area of central San Diego County.

This is a good indication of a very good reproductive effort boding well for both the fall and spring season. We can only hope for a more normal winter so that the first peak of gobbling occurs after opening day.