

Spring Turkey Outlook Good for Much of Missouri

Missouri turkey hunters have reason to be optimistic about the 2014 spring turkey season, according to the state's turkey expert.

Missouri's spring turkey season runs from April 21 through May 11. The youth season takes place April 12 and 13. This year's hunting regulations are nearly the same as last year.

One difference is in tagging requirements. Hunters no longer need to attach their voided permits to harvested turkeys, as long as they remain with the turkey. If you are away from your turkey, you must attach your voided permit to the bird's leg.

Labeling requirements also have changed. In previous years, turkeys had to be labeled with the taker's name, address, and Telecheck confirmation number before someone other than the taker could transport or possess the turkey. Beginning this year, date of harvest also must be included in the labeling information.

Before someone other than the taker can transport a turkey that has been reported through the Telecheck system, it must be labeled with the date taken, the taker's name, address, and Telecheck confirmation number.

Also new this year is the addition of crossbows and atlatls to take turkeys during the spring season. Managed turkey hunts will be held on several additional conservation areas this spring. Details about these and other turkey hunting regulations are available in the 2014 Spring Turkey Hunting Regulation and Information booklet, which is available from hunting permit vendors and Conservation Department offices statewide. The booklet also is available at mdc.mo.gov/node/4066

SEASON FORECAST

Resource Scientist Jason Isabelle is in charge of the Missouri Department of Conservation's wild turkey-management program. When asked about prospects for this year's spring turkey season, he pointed to turkey reproduction statistics from the past three years. Observers throughout much of the state reported strong production in 2011 and 2012. That means hunters in these areas can expect to see strong numbers of 2- and 3-year-old gobblers this year.

Hunters prize 3-year-old gobblers are prized by hunters because their greater experience makes them challenging to hunt. They have longer spurs and weigh more on average than younger birds, giving them a higher status among hunters.

On the other hand, 2-year-old gobblers are more likely than younger or older birds to gobble lustily and often. Lots of gobbling makes hunting more exciting, so much so that most hunters consider gobbling activity the most important part of a good hunt.

"Hunters throughout much of the state should be in for a good spring turkey season," says

Isabelle. “There should be quite a bit of gobbling and good numbers of adult birds for hunters to pursue.”

Isabelle noted that wild-turkey production dipped last year, so 1-year-old gobblers – commonly called jakes – will be less abundant this spring. That won’t affect the quality of hunting all that much now, but it should be a caution to hunters who want to continue hearing lots of gobbling in the future.

“Hunting is a substantial source of mortality for male turkeys,” says Isabelle. “Most jakes survive to be 2-year-old gobblers. Of course, jakes are legal to harvest in Missouri and they do make excellent table fare, but for those hunters interested in having more adult gobblers in their hunting area in the future, passing up opportunities to shoot jakes is one way to achieve that.”

Predicting any given year’s turkey harvest is difficult, because weather exerts a strong influence on turkey behavior and hunter effort. With more-or-less-average weather, Isabelle says he expects this year’s state-wide spring turkey harvest to be close to last year’s combined total of about 46,000 for the youth and regular seasons.

Turkey numbers vary among regions in Missouri. Although hunter success tends to be lower in the Ozarks, where large tracts of timber make hunting more difficult, hunters in southern Missouri are likely to notice an increase in turkey numbers, particularly in eastern counties.

“We’ve seen some very good production for the last three years in the eastern Ozarks,” says Isabelle. “This good production should translate into some great hunting opportunities. Another region of the state where I expect to see an increase in harvest is the Ozark border, including counties like Cedar, St. Clair, Hickory, Polk, Christian, and Webster.”

He says he doesn’t expect much change in turkey harvest from last year in most of the rest of the state. Exceptions include parts of northwest, west-central, and southwest Missouri, where production has not shown the improvements that it has elsewhere. Offsetting this, however, are the tactical advantages hunters enjoy in northern Missouri, where wooded tracts are smaller and more scattered. In these areas, turkeys are more visible and decoys are generally more effective in bringing turkeys within range.

Isabelle says he doesn’t expect this year’s severe winter weather to affect turkey hunting.

“I don’t think that the conditions we experienced this winter negatively affected turkey survival,” he says. “Turkeys can deal with cold weather quite well. Although we did get a few snow storms, none of the totals that we saw or the length of time that snow conditions persisted were severe enough to negatively impact turkey survival.

HUNTING CONDITIONS

Missouri’s spring turkey season always opens on the third Monday of April. Under this formula, the earliest the season opener can occur is April 15, as it did last year. The latest it can fall is April 21, as it does this year. Isabelle says this timing is designed to put hunters in the woods when gobbling activity is near its peak, while being cautious not to interfere with turkey reproduction. It is based on studies showing that peak gobbling typically occurs in mid-April, though weather can shift it a week or two earlier or later. “We understand that many hunters prefer an early spring season, so our goal is to balance the desires of hunters with the biology of the bird. We want hunters to have a great experience, but we also want to make sure that the bulk of our hens are bred, and a portion of them nesting,

before the season starts,” says Isabelle.

According to Isabelle, the main difference hunters can expect with this year’s late season opener is more advanced green-up of vegetation.

“Assuming normal weather conditions in the next few weeks, the woods will be bit greener, especially during the last week of the season, than they would be when the season starts earlier,” says Isabelle. “This can make gobbling a bit more difficult to hear, but it also allows hunters more freedom to move through the woods unseen as they set up on a gobbler.”

HUNTING TIPS

Isabelle rates pre-season scouting as one of the most important factors in determining hunter success. This includes going out before the season to study turkeys’ behavior patterns.

“Get out early in the morning and listen for birds at your hunting location,” he says. “If you do this enough times, you’ll develop a sense of which areas are being used more than others. Get out there and look for areas in the timber where birds have scratched through the leaves in search of food. These are excellent spots to set up in later in the morning if early morning efforts did not result in success.”

For those hunting areas dominated by open land, he recommends sitting on high spots scanning the surrounding area with binoculars.

“Turkeys generally do not use all portions of a field the same. They have preferences for certain areas, and knowing where those areas are ahead of the season will increase your chances of success.”

SAFETY

Once the season starts, Isabelle urges hunters to avoid the main cause of firearms-related turkey-hunting incidents – mistaking or being mistaken by another hunter for game. He notes that the vast majority of spring turkey hunting incidents involve hunters who fail to positively identify their targets.

“Turkey hunting is an exciting activity,” says Isabelle, “but hunters should never let that excitement cloud their judgment. Before pulling the trigger, hunters must be absolutely certain that what they are shooting at is not only a turkey, but a legal turkey, which would be a male turkey or a turkey with a visible beard during the spring season.”

Isabelle also mentioned the importance of “defensive hunting.” This means taking measures to avoid being put in a potentially dangerous situation. One way to do this is to wear hunter-orange clothing when moving through woods or fields. This alerts other hunters to your presence. Another important safety precaution is to never attempt to sneak within shotgun range of a gobbler. Use your calls to bring the bird within range.

When hunting with one or more companions, it is critical that everyone in the hunting party know the others’ locations. The safest way to accomplish this is to stay together. If you do separate, agree on a plan for where everyone will hunt and stay in those areas until meeting at a designated spot. “Many hunting incidents involve hunters from the same party,” says Isabelle. “When you’re hunting with someone else, it is critical that you always know where they will be located.”

The Conservation Department's First Turkey Program is a great way to memorialize a hunter's first successful hunt. The program provides a free commemorative certificate suitable for framing. You can even add a photo of the proud hunter with his or her bird. Creating a tangible reminder of a once-in-a-lifetime experience begins with visiting mdc.mo.gov/node/10469. The same site has forms for a hunter's first deer for youths or adults.