

WILD TURKEY FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract: The California Fish and Wildlife Plan of the Department of Fish and Game embodies a three-phase program; namely, expansion of the range, preservation of the habitat, and management of the species on a sustained yield basis. Only one phase, the expansion of the range, has been initiated. During the last four years 253 wild turkeys have been trapped in California from previously established populations and transplanted to seven suitable areas. Also, 63 wild trapped Merriam's turkeys and 25 wild trapped Rio Grande turkeys were received from other states and released in California. Hunting was recommended as a management tool. Examples were given of huntable turkey populations established outside the historical range of the wild turkey.

The future of the wild turkey (Meleagris gallopavo) in California is dependent upon how well we plan for it. The wildlife plan for wild turkeys as set forth in the California Fish and Wildlife Plan (Calif. Dept. Fish and Game, 1965) includes the preservation of the species, expansion of the range, and the preservation of the habitat and the management of the species on a sustained yield basis.

Planning is futile unless an action program follows. We have initiated one phase of the plan--expansion of the range by trapping and transplanting wild turkey from previously established populations to other suitable areas.

During the last four years 253 wild turkeys have been trapped in California and transplanted to seven areas in the state. Survival of the planted birds was very good, and reproduction was good to excellent on all release areas. Also, through trade agreements with other states we have received Merriam's turkeys (Meleagris gallopavo merriami) from Arizona, Colorado, and Wyoming; and Rio Grande turkeys (M. g. intermedia) from Texas for release in California. There have been 63 Merriam's wild turkeys trapped in other states--24 from Arizona, 14 from Colorado, and 15 from Wyoming--and released

in California during the last two years. They produced young the first year after release. Also, 25 Rio Grande turkeys from Texas were released near Bear Valley, Colusa County, and on the Spenceville Wildlife Area, Yuba County. They also produced young the first year after release. In these areas reproduction was outstanding. An observation of 3 hens with 25 young was made during the last breeding season.

The program of trapping and transplanting wild turkeys will be continued until all suitable areas have been stocked, and we have a great deal of potential habitat.

The second phase of the wild turkey plan, namely the preservation of the habitat, has received little attention, although it should, because the expansion of agriculture into the coast live oak (Quercus agrifolia) forests of the south coast range will reduce the available habitat. Here we must plan well; otherwise wildlife will continue to come out second best in the overall economics of land use. Demands for hunting recreation, however, can tip the balance in favor of wildlife.

The third phase of planning is the management of the species on a sustained yield basis, and that should include hunting since the wild turkey population in San Luis Obispo County is well enough established to warrant a controlled hunting season. This population successfully adjusted to an environment in which contact with man and his works was inevitable. I think the observation by Hewitt (1967) sums up this situation nicely. Hewitt states, "Experience suggests that subtle behavioral changes which appear to have taken place in some populations of birds may be successful adaptations to assure adjustment to new environments. We now find those birds surviving in farm woodlots and other habitats foreign to those occupied by the original wild turkey." This is not a healthy situation. Turkeys, under these conditions, tend to lose their "heritable wildness".

Because there is normally a rapid turnover in wild turkey populations and young birds usually approach half of the population, hunting could be used as a means of converting the annual losses to an asset--a trophy for the California hunter. Hunting also tends to eliminate the tamer birds and causes the others to become more wary.

Other populations should be shot as soon as possible after establishment. This could be in the neighborhood of 4 to 5 years, and that is not a pipe dream.

Let us look at what some other states have accomplished with a few transplants of wild turkeys. Hunttable wild turkey populations have been established by the states of Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, North Dakota, and South Dakota. All of these states, incidentally, are outside of the original range of the wild turkey.

Washington stocked 47 wild turkeys in 1960 and 1961 and established a huntable population in one county. The first hunting season in 1965 ended with a kill of 150 birds.

Oregon failed to establish a wild turkey population with game farm stock and then initiated a program of transplanting wild trapped birds in 1961 with turkeys acquired from three states. The first hunting season was held in 1965 with one county open for 1½ days. Three hundred tags were issued, and 150 turkeys were reported killed.

Nevada stocked 24 wild turkeys in 1961 and opened the first season in 1965. Fifty tags were issued at \$10 each. Only two turkeys were killed, although 82 birds were seen by hunters.

Montana released 31 turkeys obtained from Colorado and Wyoming in 1954 and 1955. By 1958, a population of 1,000 had been established. The first season was opened in 1958, and a kill of 100 birds resulted.

Wyoming originally stocked 15 turkeys in 1935. By 1958 the population was estimated at about 10,000 turkeys. This was one of the more spectacular successes.

South Dakota is the only state with a population established from introduced turkeys that issues an unlimited number of hunting permits. Introductions totaled only 25 turkeys.

Most of the states previously mentioned have both a spring gobble season and a regular fall turkey season.

Management of the wild turkey in California will call for research and cooperative agreements between forest managers, both public and private, and wildlife managers to insure that the wild turkey will have a place in forest management plans. We must have the basic biological data to effectively manage the wild turkey.

In view of what has been said, I think the future of the wild turkey in California is far from dim.

LITERATURE CITED

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