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Why Georgia Doesn't Have a Fall Turkey Season

Georgia Wild Turkey Committee

Georgia's wild turkey population has undergone a tremendous change. In 1973, when Georgia's turkey restoration project was initiated, the estimated statewide turkey population was only 17,000 birds. Over 4,500 turkeys were trapped and relocated from 1973-1996. Today, turkeys exist in every county and the statewide population is nearly 300,000 birds. As the population exploded, many hunters developed an interest in turkey hunting. Hunters often inquire about changes to hunting seasons and "When will Georgia initiate a fall hunting season?" is a common question. Many factors must be considered when answering this question. These include wild turkey biology, hunter objectives, conflicting user groups, number of hunters, population trends and hunting regulations that are compatible with the long-term good of Georgia's wild turkey resource.

The most important consideration is to maintain the long-term survival of the turkey population. Because of the biology of wild turkeys, it is difficult to over-harvest the turkey population with a gobbler-only season in the spring. A single gobbler is able to mate with numerous hens during the spring. After mating, a hen lays about 12 eggs and incubates them for 28 days. If a hen's nest is destroyed, the hen is able to re-nest without mating again. A high spring gobbler harvest might mean that fewer birds are heard in the spring, but enough will remain to mate with the hens to produce good turkey populations for future years.

During Georgia's spring season, only gobblers, which are a small part of the population (and the most expendable), are exposed to the pressures of hunting. Fall seasons are typically either-sex seasons because it is difficult to differentiate between hens and gobblers during that time of year, especially in flocks of young birds. Consequently, fall hunting would impact all segments of the population. Additionally, a fall season would overlap our existing deer season, which could greatly increase the number of hunters in the woods pursuing turkeys (Georgia has many more deer hunters than turkey hunters). Consequently, it would be much easier to over-harvest turkeys during a fall season than during a spring gobbler-only season.

If fall hunting pressure was added, the population could be exposed to significant harm. Turkey populations typically increase in years following excellent reproduction

and decline following consecutive years of poor reproduction. Biologists collect data throughout the summer to determine turkey production trends. However, hunting regulations are established in the spring, long before production is known. When summer poult production is great, it may be possible to harvest a substantial number of turkeys in the fall without significant impact. However, during years of moderate or poor reproduction (years with poor hatching success or survival), it would be easy to overharvest the population and thus add to the decline, especially when hens are also harvested. Some states that have attempted fall seasons show that 60% of the statewide turkey harvest occurred during the fall. When you compound these risks with concerns about overlapping turkey season with deer season, it is apparent that a fall turkey season could have a negative effect on our turkey population.

Because Georgia has no fall turkey season, we are able to have the most liberal spring season in the country. It is likely that a fall season would eventually mean a decline in the overall turkey population and thus would result in a significant reduction in spring hunting opportunity. This is a tradeoff that few avid turkey hunters would be willing to accept. Careful management of Georgia's turkey population has resulted in some of the very best turkey hunting opportunities in the nation; our goal is to keep it that way.