

## Notes on Spring Turkey Harvest and Reproduction

**The wild turkey population is declining in Georgia and the Southeast, though pockets of higher numbers remain in some areas.**

Nest success and poult survival are keys to turkey population trends.

Turkeys have a complex mating system. Toms begin gobbling and strutting in February to determine their pecking order before breeding begins in mid-late March.

If the boss gobbler is killed, the others in his close group may not be able to breed hens immediately. Hens don't just breed with the next gobbler available.

Letting dominant toms get most hens bred in late March/early April gives the local population its best chance at more successful nests and putting the greatest number of poults on the ground at the same time.

Jakes will try to breed, but their sperm isn't viable.

A nest is less likely to contain any infertile eggs if the hen was bred multiple times, and by different toms, over the 10 to 12-day laying period. She will move around to visit different gobblers and breed with the most dominant ones.

Hens can store sperm for 30 days, but viability drops rapidly (which is one reason why the more she breeds, the better the odds of a successful nest). Eggs laid within a few days after breeding do better than those laid with stored sperm.

Most hens are laying at the end of March through early April. Competition to breed is most intense as hens are laying. Disturbance and disruption from hunters during this period has more impact on total poult production for the year than does hunting during the latter half of April and in May.

### **Reduced gobbling**

As toms are harvested, gobbling activity decreases: Fewer birds to gobble, and remaining birds gobble less because of disruption to the pecking order, and disturbance from hunting.

Nesting behavior of hens stimulates gobbling to increase, but this effect is weaker than the impact of hunter disturbance, which causes birds to gobble less. Net effect is less gobbling once hunting season opens even though hens are nesting.

Hunters remove the most vocal birds. Domestic breeders do this purposefully, and it works.

### **Nesting issues**

"Predator swamping" is when all the hens lay their nests within the same few weeks, so that predators can't get them all before the poults hatch. Also, a shorter nesting period means most poults are equally vulnerable at the same time, "swamping" the ability of local predators to get them all before they're able to fly.

Breeding season disruption (discussed above) causes many hens to start their nests later, and a few will not attempt to nest at all.

If a hen loses her 1<sup>st</sup> nest early, she may re-nest, but these 2<sup>nd</sup> or even 3<sup>rd</sup> attempts usually fail to produce poults that survive to the next spring.

When hens are starting their 1<sup>st</sup> nests over the course of several weeks, the predator swamping effect is lost. If there is a big size difference in the poults that do survive, hens are less likely to group up their poults in late summer, which also increases their vulnerability to predation.