

TURKEY TV: Biologists use game cameras

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Game cameras have dramatically changed the dynamics of hunting and wildlife viewing in Alabama. When used to compliment traditional “on-the-foot” scouting, game cameras offer a never-tiring (with good batteries, of course) wildlife observer 24/7 to capture images of wildlife through motion detection, heat signatures or time lapse settings.

Deer and turkey hunters often use this scouting aide in feeding areas, along trails, in strut zones and near scrapes. Hunters and landowners are often surprised by photos of a “trophy animal” that they were not aware existed on the property.

This equipment has also proven invaluable in the wildlife research arena. Similar to the benefits that game cameras offer hunters, these tools give researchers new insights on wildlife population dynamics, reproduction and behavior and how these factors are linked to habitat

quality. This technology is now being used in Alabama to measure wild turkey production. The Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries teamed with the Alabama Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit to employ game cameras and a new standardized methodology to gauge brood-rearing success among other study objectives.


For the study, cameras are placed in likely brood habitat at randomly selected points based on land cover maps that suggest wild turkey range. All photos of wild turkeys are examined with the emphasis given to the number of hens and poults. The random point selection process allows for a standardization not found in a typical observational survey. The study design also takes into account the habitat features surrounding the camera deployment sites. The survey began in 2006 at the Conecuh National Forest as a pilot study. Since that year, the project has expanded to regional applications on public and private lands. Through

ongoing design refinement, we eventually hope to develop a standardized method that is reliable, efficient and cost effective to measure wild turkey production over time. At this time, the survey application shows promise, but further research is needed before it is implemented as a state-wide survey.

One aspect of the game camera survey gleaned from the preliminary data is the importance of brood habitat. This fact is not new to wild turkey research. As previously stated, the sites sampled in our survey are randomly selected. This results in some sites with suitable brood range generally resulting in more hen and poult photos. Poor brood range usually results in fewer turkey images or images absent of turkeys. So, what is good brood range? Simply put, ideal brood range features a herbaceous (grasses and forbs) ground layer throughout the landscape in open woodland canopies. This grassy component should be managed

for the “Goldilocks Effect” — not too thin and not too thick. Turkey broods need to be concealed from predators during daily insect feasts but not restricted in movements during these foraging excursions. Also, our investigations have suggested that when broods are limited to roads and food plots for travel and bugging sites, the potential for survival may dwindle.

Our photos from cameras located along roads and openings revealed other critters that use them for travel corridors as well, namely mammalian predators. Just a few grassy roads and openings may result in predictable ambush points for nest and brood predators. Proper habitat enhancement such as prescribed fire and timber harvests will usually result in fewer nests and broods lost to predators by creating a mosaic of suitable brood range throughout the property (not just in roads and food plots). Habitat management needs to be the focus for improved conditions.



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