

Woodlands vital for turkeys

Look at 'big picture' when managing habitat for wild gobblers

BY STEVEN W. BARNETT
Wildlife Biologist

The one dominant feature in many landscapes that is often overlooked or underutilized in managing wild turkeys is the woodland habitat. So much emphasis is placed on wildlife openings and supplemental plantings that people may be lulled into the perception that planting food plots is all you need to do to manage wildlife.

Wildlife openings are very important to turkeys for nesting, brood rearing, foraging, and courtship displays, but on many properties, less than one percent of the total land base is managed in wildlife openings. In terms of the "big picture," the entire landscape should be managed to provide the same benefits of a wildlife opening and much more. Let's take a look at some wild turkey management applications for woodland habitat.

One of the most cost effective methods of improving woodlands for turkeys is controlled burning. When properly planned and executed, prescribed fire can promote more native forage plants and create more brood habitat for turkeys than other habitat enhancement techniques. Many native plant species important to turkeys, like grasses and legumes, have evolved with fire and respond well to it. Burning rotations vary depending on the site but average about three years for turkey management.

The most difficult part of burning is finding the optimum conditions including humidity, wind speed, wind direction and burn index. Some areas may not lend themselves to controlled burning. The purpose of a control burn determines when to burn. Winter burns are best for stimulating herbaceous growth, but growing season burns may be needed for dense brush control. Unless the land manager is certified in the use of prescribed fire, the expertise of the Alabama Forestry Commission or a private contractor is recommended.

Selective herbicides that are environmentally safe are becoming increasingly popular for habitat management. Products with the active ingredient imazapyr have proven effective in controlling hardwood brush without negatively affecting legumes. In addition, proper herbicide use can enhance seed-bearing plants' ability to produce heavier and more nutritious seeds in the absence of competing brush. In treated areas, flowering plants will



Metro Creative Connections

Wildlife openings are crucial to turkeys in many areas, including foraging, courtship displays, nesting and brood rearing.

thrive and attract insects, which in turn attract young turkeys, called poults. One application may last up to 10 years, making herbicide use cost effective. However, unlike prescribed fire, herbicides do not reduce the amount of dead wood nor recycle nutrients in the soil. Remember to follow the label instructions and be aware of the requirements for using certain herbicides.

Not as cost effective

Roll drum chopping and mowing are also effective treatment methods but are not as cost effective as controlled burning or herbicides. A combination of roll drum chopping or mowing along with controlled burning or herbicides will improve the natural habitat for turkeys and result in less spent planting wildlife openings.

Tree cutting can improve turkey habitat when wildlife needs are considered during the planning stages. Regardless of the type of tree harvest conducted, the most important thing to consider for wildlife is not the trees cut but the trees left. A wildlife friendly harvest will retain mast producers like oaks scattered throughout upland and bottomland sites. Trees that are

removed will open up the canopy and allow sunlight to reach the forest floor and in conjunction with brush control methods, plants preferred by wild turkeys will emerge. Remember to leave snags and cavity-den trees for other wildlife.

In areas where oaks and other important wildlife trees are limited, planting is a good alternative. With the use of a tree planter or hand tools like a dibble bar, nut and fruit trees can be planted in areas clear of brush with sufficient sunlight. Field edges, roadsides, fencerows, windrows and wildlife openings provide excellent sites. Plant a variety (remember the word diversity) of oaks and fruit trees. This ensures some food production if one or more types of trees fail in poor mast years. Trees to consider for turkeys and other wildlife species include a variety of oak, dogwood, chinkapin, hawthorn, persimmon and plum. Provide a mix of short- and long-term mast producers. For example, gobbler sawtooth oaks may produce acorns as early as five years, whereas white oaks produce acorns in 20 plus years. A good rule of thumb to improve seedling survival is to purchase the largest and most vigor-

ous nursery stock practical, use tree shelters and limit competition around the seedlings.

A common limiting factor to wild turkey populations is brood habitat. Poults survival will increase when ample insect-producing areas are available in openings, field roads and forest settings. The less distance a hen takes her brood to bugging areas, the fewer poults she will lose.

Two-fold purpose

These production areas have a two-fold purpose by providing food and cover for the hens and poults. Fewer poults losses due to predators will occur when brood habitat is sufficient. Grassy openings should be dispersed throughout the landscape. Roads that are daylighted and closed to vehicles during the brood-rearing season are excellent choices for grasses and legumes. A road's meandering effect and habitat coverage provides prime brood-rearing areas.

By applying these woodland management techniques across the entire landscape, wild turkey habitats as well as population levels will greatly improve. It requires much more than food plots for wild turkeys to thrive.