

Turkey Season Preview

Alabama hunters enjoy many opportunities to bag birds

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Alabama sportsmen should enjoy good turkey hunting opportunities this spring. Many turkey hunters reported seeing more than usual young gobblers, or jakes, during the 2017 season, a good sign for hunters heading out to bag birds this year.

"Overall, the forecast looks good throughout the state," advised Steve Barnett, an Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries biologist in Spanish Fort. "From the results of our Avid Turkey Hunter Survey, we had an increase in the number of jakes observed in 2017. It was the highest since we began the survey in 2014. Those jakes spotted in the spring of 2017 will be the two-year-old gobblers people will be hunting this year."

In most of southern Alabama including the Upper Delta Wildlife Management Area, sportsmen can hunt from March 15 until April 30. On the WMA, though, turkey hunting most stop by 1 p.m. each day. The state also offers special youth and disabled sportsmen hunts before the regular season begins.

With much of the delta requiring a boat to access it, the Mobile-Tensaw Delta doesn't receive nearly as much turkey hunting pressure as some other popular public areas. However, with 42,451 acres to explore, sportsmen with boats can find abundant places to hunt in the delta. Look for higher ground. In the spring, the delta frequently floods, forcing turkeys to congregate on whatever dry ground they can find.

"The Upper Delta WMA is always a good area to hunt turkeys, but it is contingent on flood water conditions," explained Brandon Bobo, a National Wild Turkey Federation biologist in Oxford, Ala. "Early spring of 2016 had above average rainfall that probably washed out a lot of nests in the delta. However, May and June were drier. Young birds that did make it through the heavy rain should have had a good chance of surviving. Floods don't have much effect on the number of birds, but it does disperse them. Once the water subsides, it might take them a while to get back to their old areas, but



Jake Mardis shows off the turkey he bagged.

Photo by John N. Felsher

they will return."

Southern Alabama turkey hunters looking for a public place to call gobblers might also head to Perdido River WMA. This property includes 17,337 acres of eastern Baldwin County along the Perdido River near Gateswood. In the past few years, the state did considerable habitat

enhancements to improve turkey hunting on the WMA.

"Perdido is a sleeper," Barnett recommended. "It doesn't get a lot of turkey hunting pressure compared to some other WMAs. In cooperation with the Alabama State Lands Division, we have many ongoing habitat improvements on Perdido. We're

doing prescribed fires to remove a lot of the thick understory and selected timber harvests. The thinning and burning will really open up areas to herbaceous plants that are crucial to nesting and brood-rearing turkeys in the spring and summer. It's going to take a number of years to get the habitat in better condition for turkeys."

As part of an ongoing research project, turkey season on Perdido River WMA won't open until March 24, but the season remains open through April 30. Like on the Upper Delta WMA, sportsmen must stop hunting Perdido by 1 p.m. each day.

Sportsmen might also consider visiting Geneva State Forest, which covers 16,093 acres of Geneva County near Florala. In 2016, the National Wild Turkey Federation helped the state acquire about 5,700 acres to add to the existing Geneva State Forest. The property mostly consists of mature longleaf pine forests.

"Over the years, the NWTF has helped fund projects on a lot of WMAs including Perdido and Geneva," Bobo said. "I personally know a lot of people who hunt Geneva State Forest and kill a lot of turkeys there. It's a beautiful piece of property."

Near Citronelle, the Alabama State Lands Division owns two Forever Wild pieces of property, the Frey Tract and the Russell Road Tract. One covers about 1,300 acres and the other one about 640 acres. Periodically, the NWTF and the state join forces to host special hunts on these two tracts.

"The NWTF provides money that goes towards getting hunts done," Bobo explained. "State Lands provides the manpower. We've been able to host more than a dozen hunts for women, children, disabled people and first-time hunters in the outreach program. In 2015, we introduced 70 new hunters to the sport."

For more information on the National Wild Turkey Federation, see www.nwtf.org/about/state/alabama. For more information on how to participate in the Avid Turkey Hunter Survey, contact Barnett at 251-625-5474 or send an email to Steve.Barnett@dcnr.alabama.gov.