

# Hunters harvest near-record number of turkeys this spring

Kentucky turkey hunters reported an impressive harvest of 35,655 turkeys this spring, the second highest total on record for the state.

The total, which includes the youth-only and general statewide seasons, finished just shy of 2010's record harvest of more than 36,000 turkeys. It was 21% higher than the three-year average, 23% higher than the five-year average and 18% higher than the ten-year average.

"The hatch of wild turkey poults in 2021 was the second-best recorded in the past 20 years," said Zak Danks, wild turkey and grouse program coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "This season's high harvest illustrates how poults that hatched two years ago aged into newly mature gobblers this spring, affording hunters a significantly larger number of legal turkeys to pursue this spring than in other recent years."

Spring turkey hunting in Kentucky kicked off with the youth-only season running April 1-2, 2023. Youth hunters harvested 1,889 birds, which was 30% more than last year.

Kentucky's general spring 2023 turkey hunting season, which ran April 15 through May 7, surpassed the previous spring's harvest by 32%.

Hunters harvested 12,567 turkeys during opening weekend of the general season, which was a 49% jump from last year. This season's opening weekend contributed 35% of the statewide total spring turkey harvest.

Weather on opening Saturday was great for turkey hunting, though subpar on Sunday, Danks said. Overall, hunters experienced less rainfall during the season and average temperatures were above normal, making for better hunting conditions.

"The weekday harvest was phenomenal this season as well, at 27% higher," Danks noted.

Harvest data shows that 10% of wild turkeys taken this season were 1-year-old "jakes" rather than mature gobblers. In contrast, jakes comprised 19% of the 2022 spring harvest, which further reflects 2021's good hatch. Compared to last spring, 16% more hunters harvested the season limit of two male or bearded turkeys.

Turkey harvests on public land increased by 35%. Three large federal areas had harvests of more than 100 turkeys: Daniel Boone National Forest (629); Fort Knox Military Reservation (163); and Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area (104). The top five state wildlife management areas (WMAs) and their harvest totals include: Peabody WMA (126); Clay WMA (59); Green River Lake WMA (56); Yellowbank WMA (43); and Lake Cumberland WMA (33).

Statewide, the top five counties of harvest included Ohio, Pulaski, Graves, Breckinridge and Hart. Three of those counties are in the Green River Region, which saw the highest regional harvest at 10,038 turkeys. Per square mile, more turkeys were harvested in the Northeast and Bluegrass regions, including Robertson, Pendleton, Owen, Anderson, and Bracken counties. Adair WMA in Boone County held the highest harvest per square mile this season.

Hunters should look out for the department's upcoming turkey-related surveys. Eligible license holders may be selected at random to participate in the post-season hunter survey,

which will include questions about hunting methods, regions and dates, amount of time spent hunting and other factors. The survey gathers important data used by the department's wild turkey program to support hunting opportunity and population management efforts, so hunters should respond even if they have not spring turkey hunted.

Additionally, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife calls on volunteers to report sightings of hens with poults throughout July and August as part of the annual brood survey, which helps biologists monitor trends in the state's turkey population.

Danks said hunters harvested 152 leg-banded turkeys this season, which will contribute to the department's ongoing turkey population studies in partnership with Tennessee Tech University. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife field staff live-captured and banded 420 male turkeys earlier this year, following the 236 banded last year. All turkeys were leg-banded then released back into the wild at the same places they were captured. Goals of this study are to investigate the impact of hunting and various diseases on the turkey population, and it will continue through 2025.

The Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission (regulation-setting board) has proposed several recommended changes to fall turkey hunting regulations, including:

Reducing the fall season harvest limit from four to two turkeys (only one of which may have a beard longer than three inches); and Specifying for legal turkey hunting a set distance of 600 feet from baited sites.

It is illegal to hunt turkeys over bait in

Kentucky. Pending regulations note that a turkey baiting prohibition would not apply to bona fide agricultural practices or planted food plots, nor cross property boundaries. The recommended changes to regulations are not yet effective, as they must receive legislative approvals.

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