(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Jared Garver didn't plan to spend a career releasing wild turkeys everywhere in Illinois. Nobody thought it was possible.

A Modern History of Wild Turkeys

Story By Joe McFarland

The odds were not in any hunter's favor that April morning in 1970. Not even for Jared Garver, a young wildlife biologist who'd taken a few days off work to hunt for wild turkeys in Union County in southern Illinois.

It was Garver's first-ever turkey hunt. Truth be told, it was everybody's first turkey hunt in Illinois. There hadn't been a hunting season for wild turkeys in the Prairie State since 1903. Turkeys had vanished from Illinois, victims of wild overharvest during the 1800s.

So every hunter in the woods shared the same story in 1970. A total of 1,000 lucky people held permits for the state's first wild turkey hunting season in 67 years. Every hunter knew the chances. Only recently flocks reappeared in Illinois. Neighboring states had offered a few wild birds to release in southern Illinois during the early 60s. And while populations weren't yet widespread, officials believed enough wild turkeys existed in three Illinois counties to allow hunters a modest take.

After nearly six decades without a hunting season, expectations weren't high. Entire generations had never seen

Now retired, former DNR wildlife biologist Jared Garver (above) continues to promote the amazing success of wild turkeys biologists started releasing in Illinois in the 1950s.

Since wild turkeys do not readily walk into box traps, the development of the rocket-fired net proved instrumental in the successful live-trapping of birds for relocation.

the state's largest native game bird. Hunters no longer understood wild turkey behavior. Nobody had any experience.

On paper, it looked best for Garver. He was, after all, the wildlife biologist in charge of the state's fledgling program to re-establish wild turkeys in remote portions of southern Illinois. The eager young hunter also knew his chances were incredibly slim. He lived more than 150 miles away from the Union County woods where he planned to hunt. Also, the site he'd picked was nothing more than a place in the Shawnee National Forest where somebody told him they'd spotted turkeys recently.

Garver simply showed up that spring morning, sat down in the woods, and soon made a bit of history. Nothing should have happened, based on the odds. One should not simply walk into the woods in Illinois, sit down and expect to call up a wild turkey. Not in 1970.

But beginner's luck stumps all odds, and within seconds a nearby gobbler returned the call. A few minutes later, Garver was tagging his first wild turkey.

"This turkey hunting isn't as tough as I thought it was," the biologist grinned to himself at 7 a.m. It was just minutes after the season opened. Later, he would realize just 24 other hunters in Illinois managed to bag a turkey that season. (By comparison, more than 14,000 wild turkeys were bagged in Illinois last spring.) The man who'd eventually manage the state's wild turkey program for more than 30 years seemed to have been destined for incredible success. In all probability, Jared Garver was the first person in Illinois to legally bag a wild turkey since 1903.

Garver strolled out of the woods with tremendous confidence then, envisioning the day he would be able to introduce wild turkeys (and turkey hunting) to many several nearby counties in southern Illinois. That was the plan.

Yet there was much to learn. When he examined the success rate of hunters that year (just 2.5 percent), the biologist soon figured out turkey hunting actually is a challenge. Also, as Garver began trapping and relocating the supposedly finicky birds, he discovered something unexpected. The native birds were a natural fit everywhere they were released. His optimistic career goal of someday expanding the range of wild turkeys into four or five more counties was accomplished within just a few years.

The biologist wasn't the only one amazed. Nobody thought turkeys could do well beyond the remote forests where they were last known to exist. It seems early scientists failed to document the adaptable nature of this famous North American bird—or perhaps they didn't realize it.

"When I started with the Department of Conservation in 1969, hardly anything was known about wild turkeys in Illinois," the 62-year-old Garver said recently. "People mistakenly believed turkeys needed 50,000 acres of remote forest to survive.

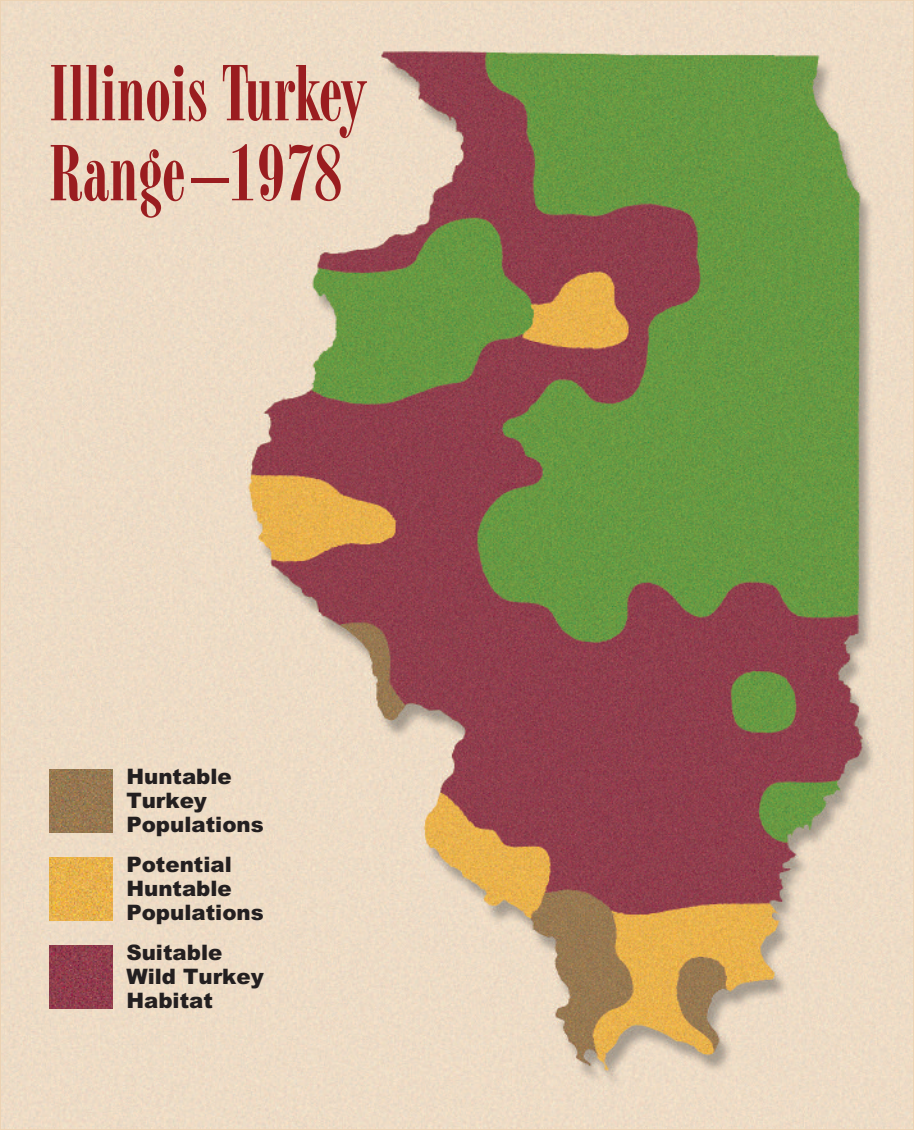
"They didn't. All they needed was protection and management."

In defense of early misunderstandings, original attempts to stock wild turkeys in the Prairie State were a total failure.

"They tried releasing pen-raised birds in the early 1950s, but they didn't take hold," Garver explained of one early lesson. "It didn't take long to realize that didn't work. The problem was the bird."

Wild birds were the way to go. But wild turkeys were hard to catch with stan-

The National Wild Turkey Federation has been a strong partner in the recovery of wild turkeys in Illinois. Donations of equipment, including transportation boxes, helped bring turkeys back to Illinois.



dard box traps. The development of the rocket-fired net allowed biologists to catch wild birds—in flocks—and transport them into suitable habitats in Illinois.

"It wasn't until the cannon net was developed that we were able to successfully trap turkeys in numbers," Garver said.

Today, many of us recognize this technique biologists now use for capturing wildlife. Garver would set out enticing grain in a place where turkeys gathered, hide himself, then remotely launch a net across the feeding birds. Armed with this new turkey-catching device, Garver began to net and transport a mix of hens and gobblers to selected new habitat in Illinois.

At first, picking those sites was based on the still-prevalent belief turkeys required densely forested habitat. It seemed to make sense since those were the last places anyone saw wild turkeys prior to 1903.

"We'd fly over a county and look for the biggest blocks of potential turkey habitat," Garver recalled of the early search process. In addition—still mindful of earlier release failures—wildlife managers would lavish turkeys with attention after releasing them, installing food plots to ensure the bird's survival.

After several years on the job, Garver's results exceeded even his wildest hopes. Not only was the range of turkeys increased to several more southern Illinois counties, releases were made in western Illinois, and in the northwest. He traveled the state's backroads, often alone, trapping and relocating birds month after month, year after year, opening the gates for one of the greatest wildlife comebacks in Illinois history.

Virtually all of the eastern wild turkeys found in Illinois today can be traced to the original birds released by wildlife biologists assisting with the wild turkey recovery program.

By 1980, a total of five counties were open for turkey hunting, with 165 gobblers bagged that spring. By the mid-80s, with nationwide interest in turkey hunting increasing and the Illinois harvest topping 1,000 birds, the National Wild Turkey Federation began offering assistance to Garver for such things as free boxes for transporting and equipment for managing food plots.

Garver would eventually receive help from fellow wildlife biologists as he trapped and released birds in such places as JoDaviess County. But for many years the job was essentially a loner's occupation.

"During the 70s and 80s, (Garver) was pretty much a one-man show," acknowledged Paul Shelton, current head of the state's wild turkey program. "It would be fair to say he's done more to bring back the wild turkey to Illinois than anyone else."

Now retired, this Johnny Appleseed of Illinois wild turkeys enjoys the satisfactions of his career accomplishments. Still an avid turkey hunter, Garver often bags a hefty turkey just after sunrise on opening morning each April, with one difference. More than 14,000 other hunters get to share his success.