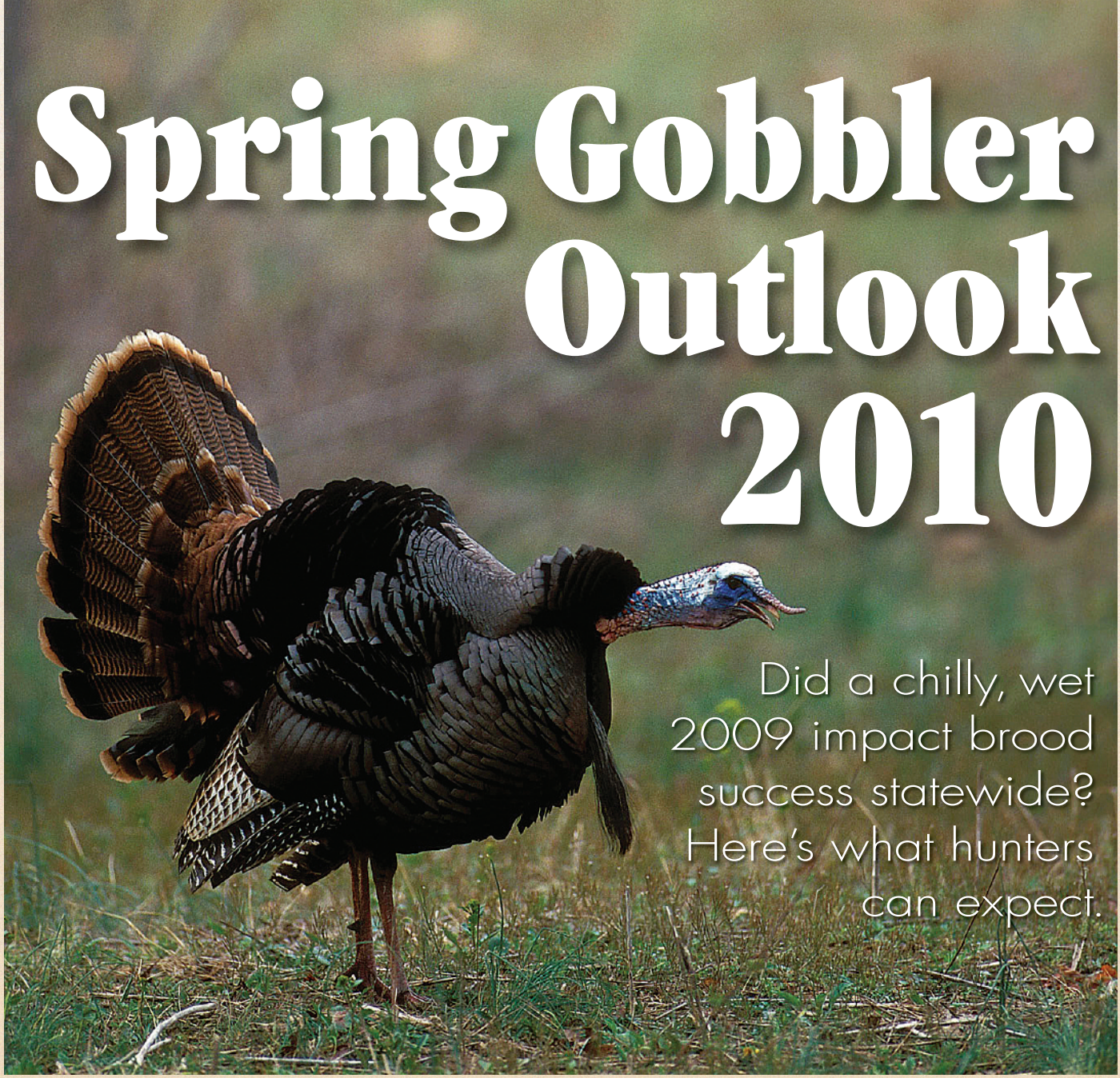
Spring Gobbler Outlook 2010



(Photo by Stephen Bauer/NWTF.)

Did a chilly, wet 2009 impact brood success statewide? Here's what hunters can expect.

Story By Joe McFarland

The first shots already have been fired. By the time this April issue of *Outdoor*-Illinois arrives in your mailbox, young guns participating in the two-day Youth Turkey Season in Illinois' South Zone already will have returned from the woods—many of them with first-ever success stories and bragging rights. The special turkey hunting season that began March 27 in the south gives young Illinois hunters the exclusive opportunity to bag the first gobblers of the spring in the Prairie State. Young hunters participating in the special hunt in the North Zone will get their first shots April 3-4.

And while harvest totals for those young hunters aren't yet available, wildlife officials already have reliable clues about how those young hunters, along with the roughly 72,900 other spring turkey permit-holders in Illinois, will fare in 2010.

(Photo curtesy of National Wild Turkey Federation.)

The straight forecast: It'll be good, but not great, according to field observations from state wildlife biologists who study the annual wild turkey brood survey reports.

"The past three years haven't been great for brood success statewide," explained DNR wildlife biologist Tom Micetich, who pointed out that hunter

Last spring Illinois turkey hunters bagged 15,488 gobblers statewide. Illinois' all-time record harvest of 16,605 turkeys was set in the spring of 2006.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Plenty of great ground cover awaits southern Illinois turkey hunters, after ice and wind storms in 2009 toppled hundreds of mature trees at many public hunting areas.

success, regardless of the hunting conditions this spring—cold, dry, windy, warm or wet—is always linked to the brood success during previous wild turkey nesting seasons.

"Since turkey hunters have their best success with 2-year-old birds, which are easier to call in than older birds (yet more desirable than the easily fooled 1-year-old jakes), the results of nesting two years ago will influence how well hunters do this year," Micetich explained.

Among all other factors, the number of 2-year-old gobblers afield can make the Illinois turkey season a record-breaker, or simply decent. And weather during the hatch has a big impact on brood success. The handful of recent, consecutive off-years for brood success—all due to bad weather during late spring—first showed up in the 2007 spring harvest results, which showed a slight decline for the first time after decades of steady increase.

Although Illinois turkey hunters claimed an all-time record of 16,605 birds during the spring 2006 season, that record was made possible by great nesting conditions two years earlier, in 2004.

When rainy, chilly weather sets in during the June hatching period, newly hatched poults can suffer hypothermia and die. The outlook for spring turkey hunters this year should therefore consider the fact that 2008—two years ago—didn't produce a great hatch statewide.

"It was a little better last year, even with the rain," observed southern Illinois DNR wildlife biologist Dan Woolard, who said the 2009 nesting

A strutting gobbler and a clear shot are the rewards for lucky hunters after weeks of scouting and preparation.

Spring 2010 Wild Turkey Season Dates

Youth season
(½ hour before sunrise to 1 p.m.)
South Zone: March 27-28
North Zone: April 3-4

Regular shotgun or archery season
(½ hour before sunrise to 1 p.m.)
South Zone: April 5-May 6
North Zone: April 12-May 13

(Photo courtesy of National Wild Turkey Federation.)

Illinois' Youth Season, where non-hunting adults accompany young hunters afield, was set for March 27-28 in the South Zone and April 3-4 in the North Zone. During this popular "preseason" for turkeys, adults may help with calling, but the shooter must be the young hunter.

(Photo curtesy of National Wild Turkey Federation.)

success in rainy-but-warm southern Illinois was greater than it was in the north, where killer, chilly rains affected newly hatched turkeys last year.

Although Illinois experienced sometimes-brutal weather during recent springs (a severe cold snap in mid-April 2007 saw temperatures plummet into the teens in southern Illinois, killing fruit blossoms and even freezing fully opened leaves), biologists point out turkey flocks continue to grow throughout Illinois, despite off years for nesting success. Wild turkey permits are not issued with the goal of keeping the population steady. Population growth is expected, so long as suitable quality habitat is available to support additional birds. Since hens are protected during the spring nesting season (only male turkeys—or the fluke bearded hens—are fair game for hunters), more hens survive to reproduce, resulting in more turkeys each year.

Last year's spring harvest of 15,488 turkeys was down slightly from the 2008 harvest of 15,792 birds, which, despite less-than-ideal brood success in 2006, was higher than the previous year's harvest of 14,766 birds. And while hunters shouldn't anticipate a record-smashing increase in harvest statewide in 2010, it should be pointed out turkey hunting in the Prairie State remains a remarkable comeback success.

"There was a time I never dreamed we'd harvest 10,000 turkeys in Illinois," explained retired DNR turkey biologist Jared Garver, who, during his more than 30-year career, helped release and restock hundreds of turkeys throughout Illinois. "Considering the fact we harvested just 25 turkeys in Illinois in 1970 (the first Illinois turkey season since 1903), I'd say we're doing exceptionally well."

DNR to Hire New Turkey Biologist

Since the December 2002 retirement of DNR wild turkey biologist Jared Garver—the only wild turkey biologist the state has ever had—DNR has been unable to fill this critically important position due to budget shortfalls. But no more.

As a direct benefit of additional revenues generated by the DNR license and permit fee increases approved by the Illinois General Assembly last year, specific funding has been targeted to hire a professional wild turkey biologist to manage the Illinois wild turkey project.

DNR Forest Resources Program Manager Paul Shelton, who oversees the wild turkey project, said the long-vacant position is expected to be filled sometime this year, depending on the number of applicants and the length of the hiring process.

"We're getting applicants almost every day," Shelton announced in late winter. "And I expect there will be many, additional qualified biologists interested in this important position."

Since 2003, the essential duties of studying Illinois' turkey population have been shared by a number of DNR biologists. Yet, no one biologist has been able to do a fully comprehensive examination of regional trends, including harvest and brood survey data. Although the wild turkey continues to thrive in Illinois, thanks to a tremendously successful restocking project, certain aspects of wild turkey management have been reduced out of necessity without a full-time biologist on staff.

But the wild turkey project has not been idle since 2002. One misconception regarding the lack of having a biologist specifically dedicated to studying wild turkeys is the impression that county-by-county permit allocations have not increased anywhere in Illinois since 2002.

"That's not correct," Shelton noted. "Where population data indicated it would be appropriate to do so, we have increased permit allocation quotas in all of the counties where turkey hunting is offered."

Shelton added that additional modifications to individual county permit allocations and inclusion of additional counties for fall hunts are quite possible after the new biologist reviews the data.

Despite less-than-ideal nesting conditions in recent years, wild turkey flocks continue to flourish statewide due to careful harvest management.

(Photo by Henry Zeman/NWTF.)