



MASSWILDLIFE

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Wild Turkey Hunting Regulation Summary

At the request of the Fisheries and Wildlife Board, and in response to a request submitted by the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), we initiated a review of wild turkey hunting regulations with the goal to evaluate potential changes to enhance turkey hunting opportunities.

Population Status

Wild turkey restoration began in 1972 with the introduction of wild trapped birds from New York State into Berkshire County. Population expansion was immediate in nearly optimal habitat across western Massachusetts. Subsequent trap and transplant facilitated the inevitable expansion of wild turkeys across the state. Turkeys are now common to abundant in every jurisdiction within the state with the exception of the island of Nantucket (and perhaps some of the Elizabeth Islands). Hunting began with a limited spring season in 1980; regulations were progressively liberalized as the population and distribution of turkeys expanded. Recently turkey harvest has remained very high and stable; approximately 2500-3000 turkeys are harvested every year during the spring season. In addition, the ratio of adult males to juveniles in the harvest is high (typically 2-3:1) indicating high poult recruitment and low juvenile (e.g., jake) harvest rates such that there is an abundance of adult turkeys on the landscape available for harvest each year. These factors indicate that turkeys are widespread across the landscape with an age structure that can support additional adult male harvest during the spring and moderate either sex harvest in the fall season.

Youth Day

Expand hunting hours to ½ hr before sunrise until 5 P.M. The youth day is only a single calendar day each year and therefore, limited in terms the total amount of time a youth has to hunt. Expansion of the hunting hours will greatly increase the total time available for hunting, and virtually no impact on other constituents or biological issues (e.g., hen disturbance) due to the relatively low participation on youth day (approximately 250-285 youths statewide).

Allow all permits issued to youths aged 12-14 to be utilized across the entire spring AND fall season. Youths aged 12-14 years old who successfully complete the mandatory training program are issued a free turkey hunting permit with 2 turkey tags. However, currently these tags can only be utilized on youth day and the remainder of the **regular spring season**. Initially, when these permits were created it was deemed reasonable as those youths were specifically receiving training geared towards spring turkey, and there was limited applicability for the fall season. However, youths demonstrate significant initiative to earn those permits, and as 12-14 year olds will always be hunting with a mentor (while they are 12-14 years old). Consequently it is unnecessary to restrict them to the spring season only.

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Spring Season

Increase the daily bag limit to 2 per day. Currently turkey hunter interactions may negatively affect many hunters across the state. To alleviate the high hunter effort experienced in the early portion of the spring turkey season without intentionally reducing participation, increasing the bag limit has the potential to reduce hunter effort when some hunters are able to harvest a season limit in a more efficient manner. This would remove hunters from field and reduce some hunter interactions. Tagging and reporting would remain similar to deer (2 unsealed in possession).

Fall Season

Expand fall season (ARCHERY ONLY) to overlap the exclusive archery deer season. In 2012, the fall turkey season length was originally initiated in WMZ's 10-12, and season length increased doubled from 1 week to 2 weeks statewide. Since the changes in 2012, there has been a 300% increase in the sale of "fall only" turkey permits (i.e., permits purchased after the completion of the spring season) and a near identical increase in the proportion of turkeys harvested by archery equipment. The trend in archery harvest during the fall appears to be increasing. Since 2012, the number of turkeys harvested by shotgun each year was not different than before the season was liberalized. Over half of hunters who indicated they hunt fall turkey do so while archery deer hunting, thus suggesting that archery deer/turkey hunters are increasingly willing to harvest turkeys, further expansion of this season would be well received by hunters.

Allow turkey permit buyers/hunters to participate during fall season (remove fall tag conditionality). Approximately 20% of successful spring turkey hunters harvest a season limit of 2 bearded birds, and therefore can not participate during the fall season under current regulations (2 turkey annual limit). This unnecessarily constrains the opportunity for avid turkey hunters who could also have interest in fall turkey hunting. Given the overall high population of turkeys, there is no reason to restrict additional fall harvest. This change would not go into effect until 2020.