

## Looking North

### Once stricken from the province, Ontario's turkey populations – and turkey hunting tradition – are alive and well

By Trudy Kelly Forsythe

The countdown carries through the cold winter air. As it concludes, the volunteers open the boxes similar to opening Christmas gifts. A flurry of wing ushers forth as several wild turkeys explode into flight across the snow-covered field. Some birds land in nearby trees, while others disappear deeper into the forest.

"I've seen a lot of wild turkey releases, and it's amazing to me, every time I see it," said Beth MacKay, assistant manager of Fish and Wildlife Services with the Ontario Federation of Anglers & Hunters.

Seeing the majestic birds in Ontario at all is cause for soaring hearts. In the early 1900s, wild turkeys vanished from the Ontario landscape. Unregulated hunting, industrialization and poor land helped eradicate the bird.

Today, however, thanks to a very successful reintroduction program, there are an estimated 30,000 wild turkeys in the province. The return of the wild turkeys, according to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, helped add an estimated \$2 million to the Ontario economy in 2000.

The success of the reintroduction program began in the early 1980s when OFAH, the MNR and the National Wild

Turkey Federation began discussing the possibility of moving wild turkeys from the U.S. to Ontario. Between 1984 and 1987, the partners trapped 274 Eastern wild turkeys from Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, New York, Vermont and New Jersey were trapped and transferred them to the province.

"In exchange, we gave moose to Michigan, otters to Missouri and partridge to New York," said Kevin Townsend, NWTF regional director for Canada.

Since 1987, the organizations and volunteers have trapped and relocated 2,400 birds within Ontario. Over the past three years, new blood – 581 wild turkeys from New York,

Tennessee and Michigan – has been added.

Mike Malhiot, a biologist with MNR, said the new birds helped escalate the restoration rate.

"The program will be complete when we have birds in all suitable habitat," Malhiot said.

Following the successful reintroduction, the first wild turkey season took place in 1987. The MNR offered only a limited hunt and only 1,000 tags. Hunters harvested 64 birds that year. Last year, more than 9,000 wild turkey hunters took to the fields and

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woods of southern and eastern Ontario. As a result, a total of 2,659 birds were harvested.

“We have had a hunt every year since 1987 and it is no longer a controlled hunt,” said Townsend, who has the distinction of being the hunter to harvest the first wild turkey in the 1987 season.

The opportunity to view and hunt wild turkeys was one of three objectives Ontario had for reintroducing the wild turkey. The other objectives were to restore part of the province’s natural heritage and to derive economic benefits from hunting and viewing activities.

“We’ve met all those objectives and continue to improve on them with continued management,” said Malhiot.

As the trap-and-transfer program nears completion, managing turkey habitat is becoming more important. That means planting trees and shrubs that provide food through winter and developing habitat programs similar to the NWTF’s Operation SOS.

One vital program, which benefits hunters and the restoration effort, is the OFAH’s wild turkey hunting seminars. Folks interested in hunting wild turkeys in Ontario must take a mandatory one-day turkey hunting seminar. Each participant must pass the seminar exam, given by the MNR, to qualify to hunt wild turkeys in the province. The seminars are also open to nonhunters. Since the seminars began, approximately 25,000 people have qualified to hunt wild turkeys in the province.

“The seminar includes the history of the wild turkey, identification, calling, hunter ethics, safety information, cooking and cleaning,” said Townsend.

The success of the reintroduction attests to the remarkable cooperation between the various groups that have brought the wild turkey back to its

natural habitat in Ontario. MacKay echoed the importance of the volunteers and the organizations involved.

“If it weren’t for all of the volunteers, including the landowners who give access to their property, the program never would have been so successful,” she said.

Volunteers come from all over the province and include members of OFAH and NWTF Canada, as well as school children. They volunteers do everything from raising funds and locating flocks of birds for capture to maintaining bait sites and processing, transporting and releasing birds. Volunteers also aid the trapping effort, which requires special certification because the birds are trapped using a net fired from a box with rocket charges.

Money from OFAH’s wild turkey fund, which was set up in 1984 to fund the trap-and-transfer program, is another major contributor to the program’s success. Money for the fund comes from NWTF Canada and OFAH chapters, other wildlife associations and registration fees and sales of merchandise from the wild turkey seminars.

The future of the wild turkey in Ontario couldn’t look better. The Ontario MNR is currently studying areas north of the wild turkey’s existing range to see if the habitat and climate are suitable for supporting the birds while NWTF Canada’s vision for the future includes helping other Canadian provinces establish wild turkey populations.

These projects, coupled with the cooperating organizations’ dedication to management programs that incorporate hunting and habitat management, will ensure the wild turkey’s near demise a century ago is never repeated.