

*Introducing a new game
bird creates new problems —*

The Wild Turkey in Minnesota

DON H. LEDIN

"Our sportsmen club is interested in obtaining some wild turkeys to be released. Can they be raised successfully in our section of the state?"

This and similar inquiries have been coming to the Section of Game in increasing numbers over the past year. It's quite evident that the sportsmen in the state are becoming more and more interested in raising wild turkeys as a club project. This interest may stem from the success that North and South Dakota and Wisconsin have experienced with their experimental stocking, or it may be that sportsmen are willing to take a long shot with the hope of having another game bird established in Minnesota.

This article has been written to summarize information on some of the wild turkey projects now being conducted by the Division of Game and Fish and by private individuals and sportsmen's clubs throughout Minnesota, and to explain the general habits and requirements of the wild turkey.

It is not known for certain if turkeys were ever native to Minnesota. It seems possible from a study of early records that the wild turkey occurred in southwestern Wisconsin and central Iowa. According to Dr. T. S. Roberts in "Birds of Minnesota" they may have occurred in the extreme southern

part of Minnesota along the Mississippi River and its tributaries and at the headwaters of the Des Moines River in Jackson County.

One old time logger and surveyor from Onamia reported that wild turkeys occurred on the present Mille Lacs Game Refuge and Public Hunting Grounds in Mille Lacs County in the late 1880's. Whether these were domestic turkeys which escaped from captivity and became established in the wild, is not definitely known.

Frank Blair, former Director of the Division of Game and Fish, is believed to have been the first to attempt the stocking of wild turkeys in Minnesota. In 1923 nine turkeys were received at the Game Farm at Mound, Minnesota. One year later an additional 25 were obtained from Texas and 100 from Maryland and Pennsylvania. These birds were liberated in an enclosed wooded area where they mated and hatched out a considerable number of young. There were 350 at the end of the first year and 592 at the close of the second year.

On February 22, 1926 approximately 250 turkeys were released by Mr. Blair in Hennepin, Ramsey, Carver, Dakota, Scott, Wright, Meeker, McLeod, Morrison, Pine, Rice and Washington Counties. Other releases were also made in Winona and Houston Counties.

Some of the birds wintered all right the first year but according to reports

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on this first release, the principal enemy proved to be the raccoon. They disturbed the birds during the nesting season and while they were roosting. It is not definitely known what happened to other turkeys but it wasn't too many years before all the birds disappeared from the area of original release.

In September 1957 — 31 years after the first release another turkey experiment was undertaken by the Division of Game and Fish in the Whitewater Game Refuge and Public Hunting Grounds near Winona. Prior to the final approval of this project, Roger Latham, Pennsylvania turkey authority was asked to examine the potential turkey range in the Whitewater area. He believed the area would meet most of the requirements necessary to successfully raise wild turkeys.

One comment which led us to be somewhat cautious in undertaking this project was that in his opinion there were too many openings and not large enough acreages of mature hardwoods — even though the Whitewater Refuge and Public Hunting Grounds is approximately 22,000 acres and consists largely of the northern hardwood and the bottom land hardwood types. Red oak, white oak, bur oak, American Elm and basswood are the most common species in this area. The topography is mostly that of steep hills and long, narrow, isolated valleys.

Because the topography and the woody cover of the Whitewater region appeared to be the best in all of Minnesota, 37 adult eastern wild turkeys were purchased from the Allegheny Turkey Farm in Pennsylvania by the Division of Game and Fish at a cost

of \$694.00 and were released in September, 1957. The birds were banded and released in two groups. The first group consisted of five toms and fifteen hens and the second group of nine toms and eight hens.

The winter of 1957–58 was rather mild and the majority of turkeys came through in good condition. However, remains of six dead birds were found by July, 1958. One had been killed by a deer hunter, two had been taken by predators, and three died of unknown causes.

By September of 1958, we had reports of several broods but we found it difficult to determine the exact size of the broods. Five broods totaling 49 birds were reported during the summer of 1958. George Meyer, refuge manager at the Whitewater, determined that we had a total of 75 wild turkeys going into the winter of 1958–59.

The mast or nut crop was very poor in the Whitewater Valley during the summer of 1958. Possibly as a result of the poor food conditions and an open deer season in the fall of 1958 small groups of the turkeys dispersed and were reported this last winter (1958–59) from Wabasha to just south of the town of St. Charles. This is a total dispersal distance of approximately 23 miles.

Part of the original release has returned to the Whitewater Refuge and Public Hunting Grounds and is using the area for nesting purposes. Several broods have already been reported this year by local people in the vicinity of Elba. The town people as well as the farmers are vitally interested in these turkeys and have been most helpful in reporting their movements, size of

broods and possible poaching to employees of the Division of Game and Fish.

In addition to the Whitewater release by the Division of Game and Fish numerous sportsmen clubs throughout the state have undertaken as one of their conservation projects the purchase and raising of wild turkeys. Some of the larger releases have been made by the Dilworth Hook and Bullet Club in Clay County, Big Lake Sportsmen Club in Sherburne County and the Stalker Lake Sportsmen Club in Ottertail County. More recent releases have been made by the New Ulm Lost Dog and Fox Club in Brown County, Vernon Center Sportsmen Club in Blue Earth County and Caledonia Rod and Gun Club in Houston County.

The Dilworth Hook and Bullet Club, near Moorhead and located in the prairie region of northwestern Minnesota began their project in 1955 with the

purchase of 51 wild turkeys chicks at a cost of \$150.00. The birds were penned for about one year. At the end of this time a total of 35 birds remained. The following March an additional 20 adult turkeys were purchased for \$464.00. During the summer and fall of 1956, 34 hens, 20 toms and 25 poults were released in groups of 6 to 15 in five scattered areas in Clay and Becker Counties. One of these releases was made on the Federal Tamarac Refuge in Becker County which was believed to be good habitat for wild turkeys. Hens successfully brought off broods the following spring but little is known of the status of the flock at this time.

Two additional releases of 13 and 11 respectively were made in 1956 and 1957 on the Carl Ekre farm, Hawley Township, Clay County. In these particular releases the hens began nesting in alfalfa fields and successfully



Wild turkeys on the run in Clay County, northwestern Minnesota. Even the inexperienced shooter should be able to hit a target of that size.

brought off several broods. Late in the summer of 1957 one heavy old tom, unable to fly into his roosting site because of his weight was killed by one of the local farm dogs. During the summer 13 turkeys roosted in trees within the yard of the Ekre farm. However, just before Thanksgiving in 1957 the entire flock disappeared and never were reported again.

A similar turkey experiment was undertaken by the Big Lake Sportsman Club, Sherburne County. In this case however, all birds purchased were adults. In May 1956, 20 adult hens and 3 gobblers were purchased from an organization in Utopia, Texas. The turkeys were of the Merriam strain, pen raised and considered three-fourths wild. The following year two additional adult toms were purchased and released. These birds were placed in a compound on the Ray Possehl farm 7 miles northeast of Big Lake in the Sand Dune State Forest and Game Refuge.

The turkeys were hand fed part bran and part corn for a few days and then were released to wander freely around the forest. The hen turkeys proceeded to make nests and hatch young poults. Although only about 10 turkeys still are roosting in the trees along the side of the Possehl farm house, other flocks have been seen or heard in isolated areas about ten miles from the original point of release. In the late spring of 1959 one of the club members estimated that the original flock has increased to between 50 and 75 birds. Last fall on the opening day of the 1958 upland game season several over zealous hunters eliminated

seven turkeys from a flock of 17 which had been roosting on the Possehl farm.

The Stalker Lake Sportsmen Club in Ottertail County has also undertaken a wild turkey raising project. This club purchased 54 eastern turkeys from the Brookmount Farms in Pennsylvania in May, 1957. Three releases of 12 hens and 6 toms each were made in the vicinity of Underwood and Dalton. This area is made up largely of tracts of red and white oak, aspen, ash and basswood. Grain crops in this vicinity consist of oats, wheat and barley.

Broods seem to be coming off every year in all of the releases cited but other factors such as freezing weather during the nesting season, two and four legged predators and winter mortality have counter-balanced any increase in production. As a result the status of these releases indicates that they are doing little more than holding their own.

General Habits of the Wild Turkey

According to Eugene A. Walker in the December 1950 issue of "Texas Game and Fish", wild turkeys usually appear in large flocks during the period of September through December when hens and gobblers may be seen flocking separately. Also during this period, the young of the year — both males and females and adult hens — may be seen together. In fairly well populated turkey ranges large flocks of hens will be seen together in much smaller groups. During the winter months the turkeys tend to use the rougher or steeper terrain in heavily wooded areas where water is available.

Usually in late February or early March the turkeys begin moving away from their wintering area. The hen will

seek out grassy openings for nesting and shortly after she will be joined by an old tom. Yearling toms probably do not mate. Each tom will select a harem of from three to eight hens depending on the spring sex ratio. During the breeding season the tom carries a "breast sponge" or fat pad behind his crop, which was built up from foods eaten during the late fall and early winter. The fat pad supposedly supplies the much additional energy needed during the courting period when his romantic intentions supersede his interests in food. During the laying period each old gobbler travels in a very limited area and is visited every day or every other day by hens in his harem.

Nesting begins sometime in April or May with the peak of the nesting occurring in late May or early June. Most of the young are brought off after 28 days of incubation. Near the completion of the nesting season the old toms begin to form into small flocks; later in the summer the hens and their young will gather in their own large flocks.

The distance that turkeys move from nesting area to wintering area varies considerably. Movements of five to eighteen miles are not uncommon. This is borne out by the movement of one flock of Whitewater turkeys which moved thirteen miles during this period.

These seasonal movements from summer to winter range by wild turkeys add to the problems of turkey management for it is necessary to have an area large enough to include both ranges. Any area less than 20,000 acres is believed to be too limited for the

establishing of a fair size flock of wild turkeys.

Summary and Conclusions

The raising of wild turkeys is fast becoming the number one project of conservation clubs in many sections of the state. Over the past five years it is estimated that approximately 600 wild turkeys have been raised and released in Minnesota by the various sportsmen clubs and the State Conservation Department. Although in most cases the releases have been doing little more than holding their own, it has demonstrated that wild turkeys are capable of reproducing and surviving in southeastern, southcentral and northwestern Minnesota. Generally the releases have been too few in number to evaluate their potential, but the possibility of providing a sufficient number of turkeys in one area for limited hunting purposes at sometime in the future cannot be entirely discounted at this time.

The state release, although small to begin with, is believed to have the best chance of succeeding because of the size of the Whitewater Refuge and Public Hunting Grounds. The terrain, food conditions, especially mast, isolation from the general public, and protection offered the birds by the refuge, all lend support to a successful establishment.

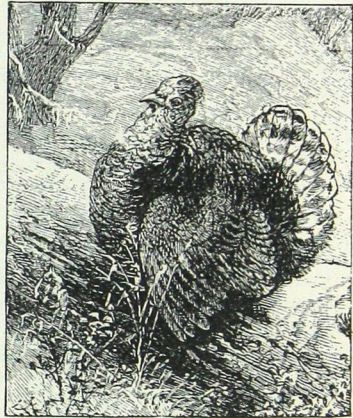
This is written from a rather pessimistic viewpoint, and for a good reason. Sportsmen clubs with only limited funds available should not undertake raising wild turkeys with the thought that they will just naturally increase and hunting will be provided in the next few years. Clubs with projects of this type are almost certainly

doomed to disappointment and would be better off undertaking conservation projects of a more rewarding nature.

However, sportsmen who are interested in raising wild turkeys for the aesthetic value provided may enjoy a project of this kind. Any club contemplating the raising of wild turkeys and penning them up for any length of time is required to have a game breeders license obtainable from the Division of Game and Fish.

Sportsmen clubs should also remember that turkeys may harbor "black head" a highly fatal disease of domestic turkeys. Only certified disease free stock should be liberated in the wild to avoid possible contamination of domestic fowl and other wild birds. Wild turkeys when released in the wild become the property of the state and are protected by game and fish laws. According to our present state game and fish law the wild turkey is protected and no open hunting season is provided for this species.

The Division of Game and Fish certainly is interested in hearing from all clubs who are raising turkeys or who plan to raise them. The Division



The domesticated Thanksgiving turkey will never be replaced by the wild variety.

would appreciate being informed of all releases, the number of birds released, the origin of the birds, the locality of the release, the success of nesting, and the cause of any mortality. Such information can help to better evaluate the possible place of the turkey in the Minnesota upland game bird picture.

ABOUT OUR EDITORIAL PICTURE

A most unusual use of a Minnesota mine pit was that of launching an exploratory balloon on July 26, 1958.

The Wearne-Portsmouth pit, which is more than 500 feet deep, was used as the site to start a 17-story high balloon on its historic flight. This pit is north of Crosby, and one "forty" of the mine is owned by the State of Minnesota. It is operated by the M. A. Hanna Company and is one of the mines on the Cuyuna Range.

In the background is a sintering plant, which burns and converts ore into clinkers for shipping. The original is a color film by the M. A. Hanna Company.