

Maximizing habitat to benefit hen turkeys will result in more poults in summer and more gobblers in spring. Here's how to create ideal situations on your property.

■ by Jason Lupardus

A HAPPY HEN YIELDS A WIN

Have you heard the phrase, “Happy wife, happy life?” Basically, we must prioritize our significant other for everything to work out for the best. This becomes even more important when we start talking about turkeys, as most people only focus on gobblers during spring. It's time to change the mindset of spring management, because if our momma hen is happy, expect Mr. Tom to provide that full-strut happy dance.

Through the years, this has been the simplest way to explain how to maximize spring opportunities when working with private landowners. You must consider a few things to

keep hens in close proximity as you prioritize management. Remember, we are focused on providing a great home with everything our hen needs to be happy, so having protected roost sites, quality nesting habitat, great brood range and a crime-free neighborhood are musts.

ROOSTS

Roost sites are one of the most overlooked management priorities. Most people have some type of forested stands or trees on their properties to serve as roosts. Research shows turkeys tend to have established roosts where they bounce around within their 1- to 4-square mile home range.

The key to this is identifying the roosts on your property and then staying away from them. Bumping birds off critical roost sites never yields good results, as birds can abandon them.

If you had someone break into your home frequently, would you want to live there?

NESTING AND BROOD HABITAT

Nesting and brood range habitat go hand in hand. When you have those critical habitat features close together, hens will be happy. Forest and field management is an important aspect, as turkeys like to see without obstructions at their eye level. Forest thinning, prescribed burning, disking and select herbicide treatments are a few of the major tools to consider when managing your property. The perfect nesting and brood range habitat for a turkey is where they can move through the understory, see over vegetation and lift quickly upward for escape, if necessary. A mix of native grasses, legumes and shrub components with adequate bare ground is essential. Blocks of this habitat type provide greater opportunities for nesting success. Disturbance frequency on a two- to four-year basis will maintain understory vegetation in ideal conditions for nesting. A one- to two-year disturbance cycle maintains ideal brood cover where insect abundance, young greens, seedy grasses and legumes, and other flowering plants are maximized.



PHOTO BY TES RANDEL JOLLY

GETTING FLOWERY

This is where it comes together, with the presentation of a bouquet of flowers. Have you noticed turkeys target fields of flowers? Many studies examining a turkey's crop have revealed what birds eat. Ideal forest openings of 2 to 5 acres adjacent to quality brood habitat and nesting range help attract and maintain hens on your property. Mixed clover is a favorite planting in these openings or on a corner of a larger hayfield. Various clover types mature at different times of the growing season, so having a mixed variety maximizes effectiveness. Make sure you have crimson clover in that mix, as it's normally the first clover to produce a showy flower that attracts insects and the adoration of a hen. There are many methods for success, ranging from a typical planting to frost seeding, and that depends on location, soil type, pH, the amount of sunlight, hydrology and weeds on those acres. Whitetail Institute can help in this arena with the correct seed mix to keep your hens happy.

TARGETING PREDATORS

Last but not least, we must keep a crime-free neighborhood for hens. After you have a great habitat plan in action, with the correct clover plantings for spring, you can assess some wildlife management techniques that help increase nesting success and the overall survival of poults at their most vulnerable stages. Turkeys for Tomorrow is an advocate for using the best wildlife management tools to help reverse declining turkey populations, and trapping can help remove some predators that create crimes on hens and poults. A plethora of research on quail populations in the Southeast shows how select trapping before next initiation can result in a 10 to 15 percent population increase in one year, and we support a similar approach for turkey populations. Selectively trapping mesopredators — medium-sized carnivorous or omnivorous animals, such as raccoons, foxes or coyotes — during a two- to three-week period before hens nest could be helpful, so check game laws in your state to see if and when you can remove criminal

predators targeting ladies on their nests.

CONCLUSION

Managing for turkeys is a year-round process, and when you focus on taking care of the lady in the house, you will definitely have plenty of gobblers strutting around in spring. No matter the size of your property, you can take the steps to maximize the habitat on your property. If nothing else, be neighborly, and work on a cooperative approach to manage for turkeys at a scale. Remember that a happy hen will provide more poults today and more turkeys for tomorrow.

Editor's note: Jason Lupardus is a certified wildlife biologist with 20 years of experience working with private and public lands. He currently serves as the director of partnerships and business operations with Turkeys for Tomorrow. Additionally, he provides technical assistance and private consulting with Wildlife and Land Management Group, LLC.



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