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TURKEY TASK FORCE

Mention the term "task force" and one conjures up mental images of a military operation. The zeal associated with a military maneuver best describes the work which is being done by a group of people who have come together to make up the Michaux State Forest Turkey Task Force in south central Pennsylvania.

Formed in 1997, the Turkey Task Force is an ad hoc group comprised of members of four local chapters of the National Wild Turkey Federation, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry, Pennsylvania Game Commission and other local sportspersons.

Several years ago, the Game Commission began to notice a decline in wild turkey populations within the Michaux State Forest area of South Mountain. These observations were confirmed by sportsmen using the area. While Pennsylvania as a whole was experiencing unprecedented growth in numbers of this regal bird, South Mountain birds were dwindling away for no apparent reason. Moreover, the decline seems to have been dramatic. A brood survey in 1988 revealed 80 separate broods; the same survey in 1996 revealed only slightly more than 10 broods. These observations prompted the formation of the Michaux Wild Turkey Task Force.

The task force maintains a two-prong purpose of identifying several potential problem areas which may adversely affect Michaux wild turkeys as well as developing action items to counter the disturbing trend.

As in most wildlife management issues, neither the reasons nor solutions for

declining populations are always apparent. Game Commission Southcentral Regional Director Willis A. Sneath said it would appear that there may be a combination of factors influencing the 80,000 acre state forest.

South Mountain is surrounded by several metropolitan areas that exemplify the urban expansion challenges of the last decade. Greater human populations result in higher incidences of human/turkey interaction and possible conflicts. Wild turkeys can, under certain circumstances, adapt to metropolitan areas. However, the main requirement is that the area must be undisturbed. This is especially crucial during the spring nesting season. The South Mountain could be looked upon as a habitat 'oasis' that is being constantly encroached upon by humans.

In an effort to accommodate the public, many of the Michaux State Forest maintenance roads are open for motorized vehicle travel, thus permitting disturbance deep within the forest. This in and of itself may be one of the variables negatively impacting upon the Michaux wild turkeys. Additionally, the forest hosts an annual motorcycle woods race each spring. Moreover, lawful driving areas involved with this event have been starting points for illegal traffic to enter into areas which were never intended to be driven. All terrain vehicles, sport utility vehicles and trail motorcycles abuse the privileges afforded them by the Bureau of Forestry.

Any law abiding hunter appreciates that turkey hunting is designed to permit consumptive utilization of the resource by using two of the variables which contribute to proper management, i.e., seasons and bag limits. It has been suggested that unscrupulous hunters with little regard for interests other than their own, are killing turkeys out-of-season or over the limit. This can cause a dramatic, rather short-term reduction in a local turkey population which would otherwise sustain a healthy yearly harvest.

Untimeliness of spring rains have been suggested as possibly being one factor which will produce a natural dip in numbers. Wild turkeys are precocial able to fend the elements at a comparatively early stage in life. Some have suggested that recent years produced spring rains on the Michaux State Forest at precisely the most inopportune times for the survival of turkey poults.

When looking at reduced local wildlife populations confined to local regions, one must always consider the possibility of toxicity within the food chain. To date there is no evidence via turkey carcasses of localized chemical poisoning. Yet, until confirmed reasons are identified, it must remain an area of concern.

Depressed foreign markets for wild furs has resulted in less furtaking. This

translates into higher numbers of the nest-scavenging predators such as raccoons, skunks and opossums.

Turkey habitat on the South Mountain is categorized as fair. With whatever other stresses are occurring, the lack of optimum habitat may be a contributing cause for the lack of resilience in the turkey population. This reduced quality is especially noticeable in the lack of herbaceous openings, a critical component of good wild turkey habitat.

Some suggest a trap-and-transfer program to reintroduce wild birds back onto the Michaux State Forest. However, both the Game Commission and the Michaux Turkey Task Force have dropped this suggestion from consideration. The task force agrees that any benefits from such a program would be short term and not addressing the underlying cause behind the loss of native birds.

The Michaux Turkey Task Force serves to not only identify problems, it also has taken action on several remedial initiatives.

Don Heckman of the Pennsylvania Wild Turkey Federation states that the Turkey Federation has requested permanent status of Bureau of Forestry rangers rather than the current part time employment from March through November. Coupled with this is a request for Game Commission officers to increase surveillance on the forest and utilize decoys in an effort to deter illegal road hunting.

Game Commission staff members also expressed concern that the release of pen raised turkeys creates a high potential for spreading transmittable diseases to native turkeys. The location of all private propagators near the state forest is being monitored. Commission officers are including information on the South Mountain situation as part of their presentations at sportsman's clubs and civic groups. Additionally, the Game Commission developed a brochure entitled, "Where Are The South Mountain Turkeys?" which is available by request.

Mike Kusko Jr., District Forester – DCNR-Michaux State Forest, states that some roads have been closed on the Michaux State Forest during the crucial nesting period between April and May. Also, recommendations for additional herbaceous openings on the forest are being considered by Forestry personnel. Along with the establishment of the openings will be plantings of self-sustaining food supplies suitable for the wild turkey.

Efforts will be made to promote expansion of cooperation for habitat work between sportsmen, state forest users, the private sector, DCNR-Bureau Of Forestry and the Game Commission.

Members of the Michaux Wild Turkey Task Force agree that the answer to

restoring South Mountain turkeys may not be readily discernable and will require additional research. The Game Commission has approved a wild turkey research project for this area, which will begin this year. Game Commisison Biologist Mary Jo Casalena will coordinate the two-year research project.

The Commission recently assigned Ms. Casalena to head-up Wild Turkey Research with the announced retirement of Bill Drake, long-time turkey biologist.

Anyone wishing additional information on the work of the Michaux State Forest Wild Turkey Task Force may contact: Don Heckman – PA Wild Turkey Federation – 14 Slate Hill Road – Camp Hill, PA 17222; Michael Kusko Jr., District Forester – Michaux State Forest - 10099 Lincoln Way East - Fayetteville, PA 17222; or Willis A. Sneath, Regional Director – PA Game Commission – PO Box 537 – Huntingdon, PA 16652.