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NEWS

WILD TURKEY STUDIES UNDERWAY

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FRANKFORT, Ky. (May 12, 2022) – Two ongoing research projects should provide insight into why Kentucky's turkey harvest has slipped since its record peak in 2010.

Hunters reported the harvest of 26,836 turkeys during the state's spring 2022 seasons. While that level is comparable to the heyday of the turkey population boom in the early 2000s, it falls well short of Kentucky's record harvest of more than 36,000 turkeys during the spring season 12 years ago, and the past 10-year average of 30,822 harvested.

Kentucky is not alone in its turkey harvest decline.

"This is a range-wide phenomenon – it's happening in other states, too," said Zak Danks, turkey program coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "Researchers are talking and collaborating with each other, trying to figure out what's going on across the wild turkey's

range."

Kentucky is currently working with Tennessee Tech University and the University of Georgia on a turkey reproduction study. Researchers are investigating nesting success and the survival rates of young birds. Biologists will study how predators, weather, habitat and gobbling affect the number of turkeys that reach adulthood.

Another ongoing study is examining the impact of hunting on the flock. For this research, being conducted in partnership with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, biologists started banding male turkeys earlier this year. Researchers will continue banding birds through 2025 to gain a better understanding of how many birds are taken by hunters versus how many birds die from other causes, such as predators.

Ben Robinson, acting director of the department's Wildlife Division, cautioned that researchers need to finish the entire project before they begin interpreting the results.

"Drawing conclusions now would be like calling the Kentucky Derby halfway through the race," he said.

Several factors impacted turkey season this spring, including bouts of cold and rainy weather. Holidays may have affected hunter numbers as well: Easter fell during the opening weekend while the spring season concluded on Mother's Day. Other factors during the spring season, such as the Kentucky Derby, youth sports or other group activities, once again competed for peoples' time.

License sales numbers this year indicate the surge in hunting and fishing participation during the pandemic has waned as COVID restrictions have eased.

Sales of licenses and permits authorizing turkey hunting dropped 6.6 percent in 2022 as compared to the previous year. Still, an estimated 75,000 to 85,000 people hunted in Kentucky during the 2022 spring turkey season.

In preliminary results from a survey of 2022 turkey hunters that is currently underway, a significant percentage has reported that they stopped hunting after harvesting one turkey because of concerns about lower turkey numbers. Final results will be available when the survey closes later this month. This and other participation-related factors may account for the decrease in the 2022 harvest.

Less gobbling observed by turkey hunters this spring – as reported in the current post-season survey – likely correlates to lower-than-average poult recruitment in 2020, reflected in the annual statewide summer brood survey results. However, last year's brood survey indicates higher than average recruitment of young turkeys.

"We've heard from numerous hunters who saw more jakes this spring, heightening expectations for a good crop of 2-year-old gobblers to hunt next year," Danks said.

As researchers and wildlife managers look to better understand what might be going on with turkeys across their range, the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission proposed several recommended changes at its meeting this past December to proactively address the perceived decline.

The commission recommended: