

Researchers stalk the wild and elusive turkey

Oregon's largest upland game bird is the subject of a cooperative study that got underway last year.

The center of the study is the Merriam turkey, and when field work is completed next year, researchers hope to know a lot more about what makes this secretive gamebird tick.

Fish and Wildlife Department biologists are hoping that the work done by graduate student Scott Lutz will help provide them with better information to guide management of the species.

In spite of the turkey's large size and popularity with hunters, relatively little is known about its life history and habitat needs in Oregon. The ancestral range of the Merriam turkey was the Rocky Mountains, from Pike's Peak to the Mexican border.

This subspecies was not introduced successfully in Oregon until 1961, when 58 birds from Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico

were obtained. Some 38 of the turkeys were released on the White River Game Management area in Wasco County.

The birds flourished and soon provided both fall and spring hunting seasons. But after an initial boom, as often happens with new introductions, the population settled back to a lower level



by Ken Durbin

where it has remained with seasonal ups and downs ever since.

The generally secretive nature of the birds, their extreme wariness at certain times of the year, seasonal migratory habits and the brushy forested terrain where they live have com-

bined to hamper efforts to learn more about the birds. This was further complicated by other demands on management biologists who were unable to spend as much time working with this bird as they would have liked.

Lutz, a doctoral student in wildlife studies at Oregon State University, was selected to conduct a study jointly sponsored by OSU, the Mt. Hood National Forest and the Fish and Wildlife Department.

He spent considerable time reviewing the literature on the Merriam turkey and last winter began attempts to trap wild turkeys in south Wasco County so that they could be fitted with small radio transmitters or colorful wing tags.

In all, Lutz caught about 50 birds at three different trap sites, put radio transmitters on 18 of them and fitted wing tags on another 24.

The birds were baited into the traps with corn. Turkeys

can be formidable to handle because of their size (up to 18 pounds or more for a mature gobbler) and the strength of their powerful wings.

It was found that slipping a common sock over the bird's head to blindfold them and hobbling their feet calmed them so that they could be easily handled. A trap full of hobbled turkeys with gym socks on their heads makes a bizarre sight, indeed.

Each bird marked with a wing tag has a different color combination so it can be identified in future sightings. A predator killed one of the radioed birds and the transmitter somehow came off another, so Lutz now has transmitters on five adult males, five juvenile males, two adult females and four juvenile females.

Lutz followed the radioed birds as they began a gradual migration from the lower areas where they wintered to the higher ground where they will mate and nest. He has already

found that the birds disperse widely from their wintering sites and it will be a challenge to keep track of all of them, even with the sophisticated radio monitoring equipment specially designed for the job.

A number of different types of habitat have been identified within the study area and water sources have been located and mapped. Throughout the study, turkey sightings will be recorded along with the kind of habitat they are using to learn more about specific habitat preferences at different times of the year.

Lutz is also trying to locate roost trees to find out whether the birds have very specific requirements in this regard. Of the trees he has thus far located, most are old growth Ponderosa Pine with strong horizontal limbs that the birds can easily fly to and roost upon. A few are in old fir trees. Many roost trees are used traditionally, year after year.

Lutz will be attempting to locate as many nests as possible to learn more about the areas preferred and types and ages of vegetation associated with the sites. He had hoped to place radio transmitters on more adult hens as an aid to locating nests, but found them especially difficult to lure into the traps. Some gobblers, on the other hand, were recaptured several times.

In addition to the informa-

tion that should be forthcoming from the radio and tag marked birds, Lutz will be recording information from other sources including sightings by employees of the Fish and Wildlife Department, the Forest Service, Warm Springs Indian Reservation and others.

Biologists with the Fish and Wildlife Department hope to learn how to improve the habitat for turkeys in Wasco County. But they also

believe the information on habitat preferences and requirements from the study will help them to select the best potential sites for future releases.

Although Wasco County is the major population center for the Merriam turkey, scattered populations exist in the Metolius and Three-Fingered Jack area and throughout the forested regions of northeast Oregon.

Classified deadline is noon Monday

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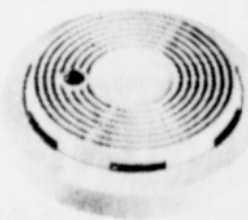
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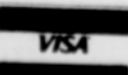
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