

Appendix H

Specific Management Recommendations for Rio Grande Wild Turkeys



Specific Management Recommendations for Wild Turkeys: Rio Grande Turkey - southwest portion of the Gulf Prairies and Marshes ecological region, Eastern Turkey - southeast portion of the Gulf Prairies and Marshes ecological region

Rio Grande turkeys are present in most of the southwestern counties of the area, generally where annual rainfall is below 32 inches. Fairly stable populations have been established in these counties due to suitable habitat and restocking programs by the TPWD. These populations are presently subjected to hunting during either the regular fall and spring turkey season or during only the spring season. A few counties with greater than 32 inches of rainfall have remnant populations of Rio Grande turkeys left over from previous stocking efforts. These populations are more dependent on rainfall patterns than from habitat management practices. These counties generally have a spring only season.

Eastern wild turkeys are currently being restocked in several southeastern counties of the area. Using wild-trapped birds from wild eastern turkey populations in the eastern United States, an intensive restoration effort was begun to stock these birds in southeastern Texas where there was suitable habitat and annual rainfall exceeds 35 inches. This restocking program is currently in the early stages and there are presently no populations subjected to hunting.

Both of these subspecies of turkeys generally have similar habitat requirements and have similar seasonal habits. Although turkeys are non-migratory resident species, they have large home ranges that change with the season of the year. Turkeys tend to be widely dispersed during the spring and summer nesting/brood-rearing period. Nesting and brood-rearing habitat is similar to that required for quail, but on a larger scale: scattered thickets of low growing brush, patchy residual herbaceous vegetation, a moderately grazed, diverse grass/forb plant community that produces seeds and insects.

After the breeding season, numerous smaller flocks that were widely dispersed during the summer tend to congregate into large winter flocks. The ranges of winter flocks are centered around riparian areas (the floodplains of large creeks and rivers) that have moderately dense stands of tall, full canopied trees. These winter flocks will disperse several miles from their riparian area roost sites on daily feeding forays. Turkeys are

attracted to feeders (not recommended for eastern turkey) and supplemental food plantings provided for deer and quail. The nearness of a ranch to a winter roost site(s), and the availability of a food source, would determine to what extent turkeys are present during the winter months.

Habitat management for the wild turkey concerns the availability of water, food, and cover. The distribution of these key components of the range is of major importance. Turkeys require water daily and can obtain water from foods or free water (ponds, creeks, rivers, etc.). Grassy or brushy nesting and brood-rearing cover is probably the most important cover requirement. Food availability of the native range can be increased by the following activities: (1) Moderately stock the range with domestic animals. (2) Utilize a deferred rotation system of grazing. (3) Control total deer numbers by harvesting proper numbers of both does and bucks. (4) Prescribed burns can be utilized to control invading brush, as well as increase production of forbs, grasses, and fruit or mast producing browse plants. In summary, range management activities that increase the diversity of grasses, forbs, shrubs, trees, and vines improves the habitat for the wild turkey. These same management practices are also beneficial to deer, quail, and many other wildlife species.

Preservation of roosting sites is a key factor to maintain a turkey population on a sustained basis. Turkey also need escape cover to travel to and from roosting sites. Mature trees utilized as roosting sites include pine, pecan, cypress, sycamore, cottonwood, most large oaks, elm, hackberry, western soapberry, and large mesquite. Dense brush thickets or solid block clearing both furnish poor habitat for the turkey. Clearing programs that leave brush strips between cleared areas are advantageous. Avoid removing hardwood trees such as the various species of oaks, hackberry, elm, or large mesquite. If clearing is needed to improve the range, irregular shaped cleared strips that follow topography are best.