

Increased turkey kill during the firearms season

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News

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An increase in Missouri's 2012 fall firearms turkey harvest confirms population gains that turkey managers predicted and hunters hoped for.

The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) Telecheck database recorded a harvest of 8,498 turkeys during the fall firearms turkey season Oct. 1 through 31. Top harvest counties were Webster with 225 turkeys checked, Laclede with 223, and Greene with 216.

This year's fall firearms turkey harvest is 1,421 more than last year, a 20-percent increase. MDC Resource Scientist Jason Isabelle credits weather in part for the jump in fall turkey harvest.

"As far as production goes, our turkey population struggled through several tough years," said Isabelle. "2008 was the wettest year on record in Missouri, and 2009 and 2010 weren't much better. All that took a toll on turkeys and other ground-nesting wildlife."

Isabelle said the hatch of 2011 was considerably better than the previous four, and it bolstered turkey numbers throughout much of the state. This year's hatch, with a statewide poult-to-hen ratio of 1.7 poults per hen, was identical to 2011, which was the best since 2002.

MDC sold 16,413 fall firearms turkey hunting permits this fall, an increase of 9.3 percent from 2011.

Isabelle said he is encouraged by the increased fall turkey harvest and optimistic about prospects for the 2013 spring turkey season.

"The last two years have provided a much-needed improvement in turkey production," said Isabelle. "We have always known that turkey numbers would rebound with favorable conditions. In parts of Missouri, our turkey numbers are still well below where they were five or 10 years ago, but the hatches of the last two years have certainly been a step in the right direction. 2011's hatch should result in the largest group of 2-year-old gobblers we've had in quite a few years, which should make the 2013 spring season exciting for a lot of hunters."

According to Isabelle, it is unlikely Missouri will ever see the numbers of turkeys it had immediately following restoration. That high-water mark was the culmination of a restoration program in which turkeys were reintroduced into areas where they had been absent for decades. Turkey populations expanded rapidly until they encountered "biological resistance" from factors that limit their numbers. From that peak, turkey numbers decreased to levels that are likely more sustainable in the long-run.

Isabelle says what the state's turkey population has experienced over the course of the last several decades is not unique to Missouri. There are quite a few other states that have experienced similar trends in their turkey numbers as well.

"As long as we have enough habitat, Missouri will have a great turkey resource," says Isabelle. "But wildlife populations have peaks during periods of favorable conditions and valleys during less favorable years. In the coming years, fluctuations in our turkey population can be expected. We'll have our higher years and we'll have our lower years. That's just the nature of a species like the wild turkey."

For the time being, the hatches of 2011 and 2012 represent considerable improvements in

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production and should serve to bolster turkey numbers throughout much of Missouri. For turkey enthusiasts, this is good news indeed.