

PA NWTF 1975-2008 33 years moving forward

By Don Heckman, PA Chapter NWTF Vice President

NWTF, PA Chapter NWTF and our 88 local chapter system in Pennsylvania have grown beyond many of the early PA Chapter NWTF founder's imagination and expectations. Over these past 33 years state and local chapters have raised and spent well over \$4.6 million for wild turkey management and research, habitat improvement, land acquisition, turkey hunting safety education, NWTF outreach programs, supporting our rights to hunt and own firearms, working on improving our public awareness, right there in local chapter areas, and state-wide when partnering with PGC, DCNR, ANF, and Corp of Engineers. This was not done by a magic wand or some yearly foundation grant. This was done over the years by turkey hunters getting involved, rolling up their sleeves, joining NWTF, creating and developing a state chapter in 1975, starting and running local chapters state-wide.

Pennsylvania State Chapter founder's set in place an action plan for growing the state chapter, while providing help and support for wild turkey management and research, habitat improvement, land acquisition, turkey hunting safety education. Starting in the mid 1980's the state chapter helped NWTF grow the Hunting Heritage Super Fund Banquet and funding program, helped with NWTF outreach programs, and worked with other wildlife conservation and sportsmen's organizations throughout Pennsylvania.

Our organization has been blessed with NWTF volunteers willing to roll up their sleeves, get their hands, arms, and legs dirty, whether it be habitat improvement work, wild turkey management plan development, banquet organization, working on land acquisition projects, manning sports show booths, providing informational and educational turkey hunting and safety seminars, working on WITO, JAKES, Wheelin' Sportsmen, Wild Turkey Woodlands, YHEC, mentored youth hunting, various legislative issues, and local community program involvement.

We also have had our Harrisburg – Capitol Hill and Elmerton Avenue – issues and we have taken a punch or two or three, and we have helped win a few issues over the years for the wild turkey and turkey hunters. A few of us have made the commitment, taken the time over the past 30 some years, to get involved in Capitol Hill legislative game law and Elmerton Avenue hunting regulation issues. The list of 45 accomplishments and achievements between 1958 and 2007 documented in my "TURKEY TALK" Fall 2007 article speak for that commitment and dedication to the wild turkey and to NWTF. The 46th accomplishment was completed January 2008 when the PGC Board of Commissioner's voted unanimously to remove mandatory use of fluorescent orange from spring gobbler season starting in April 2008.

I believe the most difficult issues NWTF and PA Chapter NWTF continue to have are trying to develop a growing NWTF adult grassroots membership base while trying to increase NWTF renewal memberships in Pennsylvania. We have tried several different methods to increase adult membership over the years, but they have not worked to our expectations. Our state wide and local communications programs need to improve so turkey hunters know what state and local chapters are doing in their area for the wild turkey, turkey hunting, turkey habitat, and hunting safety.

PA Chapter NWTF and our local chapters have a 33 year record of accomplishments for "getting the work done for wild turkey conservation", however successfully "telling the story" to turkey hunters seems to continue to be an issue. Ask any current or past board member, most have heard me preach about improving communications and telling the story, some even heard me lead a prayer session during a board meeting one time asking for the Lord's help with our communications and public

awareness.

Often the state chapter is reminded there are no crisis, no chaos, no panic in declining state-wide populations, and no critical turkey management decision to be made at the next Commissioner meeting. And granted we do not have a 500,000 state-wide, 3 year stable, wild turkey population so maybe the numbers are just not there that might lead to a major crisis or bad management decision situation. Till Pennsylvania reaches 500,000 state wide wild turkey population, may never know what those crisis or major management decisions will be.

Maybe we have done all too well with wild turkey management and wild turkey populations over the past 33 years, I would tend to believe there is a lot of truth in that statement. I also continue to believe there are far too many future wild turkey management and hunting possibilities that have been to slow in developing across this state that will need our support in the next 33 years.

Listed below are critical wild turkey management and turkey hunting milestones in our 33 year history.

We have supported trap and transfer since 1975 to move wild turkeys across Pennsylvania when the biologists have requirements to do so. A major decision we were involved in was to close the PGC turkey game farm or to close the turkey game farm. In 1980 the turkey game farm was closed, much to the disagreement of many hunters and some PGC staff. Closing the turkey game farm was the second best wild turkey management decision made in Pennsylvania, closely following our support for continuing state-wide wild turkey trap and transfer program run by wild turkey biologist Jerry Wunz and Arnie Hayden and many PGC officers across Pennsylvania. NWTf local chapter volunteers helped out with trap and transfer during the latter years of this successful management program.

Wild turkey biologist Jerry Wunz recommended a plan for establishing turkey management areas that got mixed support. PA Chapter NWTf supported Jerry's recommendation and finally in 1985 4 regional management units were created across Pennsylvania. Over the next 2 decades the management areas were increased to 9, then 12, and in 2003 22 wildlife management units were established for deer, bear, and turkey. Today there are 23 wildlife management units. In the larger picture of wild turkey management this was the third best management decision made in the past 33 years.

In 1999 PGC Executive Director Don Madl signed the very first 5 year *PGC Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania*. In 2007 PGC Executive Director Carl Roe signed the revised and updated 10 year *PGC Management Plan For Wild Turkeys In Pennsylvania*. Creating and signing these management plans were the fourth best decisions made for wild turkey management in Pennsylvania.

Tireless efforts over 21 years to get Legislative and PGC support for a much needed turkey hunting license/stamp to support wild turkey management and additional revenue for the PGC Game Fund still continue today. Our PA Chapter NWTf Turkey Hunting License Values and Benefit statements have been published in "TURKEY TALK" several times over the past 10 years, distributed to PGC Staff and Commissioners, and sent to Legislators. However white-tail deer, elk, bear, and to some extent small game rule the roost, while wild turkey value and benefit statements are continually placed on the back burner. Remember no crisis so legislators are slow to act and react.

The first of its kind in Pennsylvania with PGC, DCNR, and PA Chapter NWTf partnerships, TMA 7B Wild Turkey Task Force was started in 1996 when I organized and facilitated the first meeting followed by several years of twice a year task force project meetings. Today these now yearly meetings continue to review 8 PGC recommendations in order to determine when to open a now closed fall turkey hunting

season. PGC brochure *Dramatic Decline In South Mountain Turkeys* on the Michaux State Forest was developed and distributed for local area use.

The two and half year PGC hen telemetry research project, with NWTF and PA NWTF providing much of the research funding with volunteer members supporting the biologist, aides, and action items from the task force action items list, resulted in a completed hen telemetry study and 8 PGC recommendations being monitored and measured today. PGC Wild Turkey Biologist Mary Jo Casalena's TMA 7B research project report was featured in the latest NWTF 9th Wild Turkey Symposium.

Wild turkey management decisions based on in the ground/on the ground field data, sound scientific wildlife management principles, and regulations based on field data indices, management plan facts, and not public opinions, are the best tools for managing wild turkey resources and their habitat.

As long as sound scientific wildlife management principles are followed, management and regulation decisions are made based on wildlife species management plan objectives and strategies, with field data indices and management facts, the balance between wildlife populations, wildlife habitat, hunting and trapping seasons and bag limits will continue to support PGC's mission statement.

PA Chapter NWTF was formed to create awareness, support and improve wild turkey management and additional turkey hunting opportunities across Pennsylvania, communicate and improve turkey hunting safety, and inform and educate turkey hunters. For 33 years PA Chapter NWTF has worked for and continues to support sound scientific wildlife management principles.

Thirty three years of creating and publishing turkey hunting safety and ethics information and materials from NWTF and PA NWTF, with the latest *Positively Identify Your Target* PGC and PA NWTF posters, and the newest PA Edition of the *NWTF Turkey Hunting Success and Safety* brochure. NWTF produced the brochure to help support efforts to inform, educate, and improve turkey hunting safety among turkey hunters. A new hunting safety term was added to "Positively Identity Your Target and Beyond", "Think Safety – Hunt Safely" adds to the turkey hunting safety message used in our information education program.

We have stayed the course since 1975 and have been involved in and achieved what is right for the wild turkey first, turkey hunting second, and the organizations third. While PGC and PA NWTF have not always agreed on all issues, we work together to find common ground and achieve results for wildlife conservation, wild turkey management and turkey hunting.

I ask myself many times would PGC and PA NWTF been able to complete these 46 items without our partnership, without our PGC staff and NWTF volunteers working together to improve wild turkey management, increase state-wide wild turkey populations, continue to work on and improve wild turkey habitat, help create additional turkey hunting opportunities, improved turkey hunting safety information education, and continue to help open the doors for many new outreach programs for all hunters, trappers, anglers, firearms owners and shooters in Pennsylvania. As I continually tell the Board, find better ways to "Tell The Story" and "Pass It On". There is much more to do for all six opportunities in the next 33 years. The opportunities to continue building the foundation are endless; the challenges will be to add to the 46 major accomplishments. Over all these years, the numbers both dollars and projects and programs, tell that story. People working together making a positive difference for wildlife conservation, wild turkey management and turkey hunting have been successful in their efforts.

All have created milestone timelines for PA Chapter NWTF and all have helped build the NWTF foundation in Pennsylvania.