

Forage Extension Program

Merriam's Turkey

Habitat Management Suggestions for Selected Wildlife Species

By R.J. Mackie, R.F. Batchelor, M.E. Majerus, J.P. Weigand, and V.P. Sundberg

The Merriam's turkey is Montana's newest upland game bird. A native of the pine-oak woodlands of Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona, it was first introduced into central Montana in 1954 from birds obtained in Colorado. Subsequent releases were made in the Long Pines of southeastern Montana near Ekalaka and near Ashland. As turkeys prospered in these areas, surplus birds were trapped and transplanted to other parts of the state. Since the early 1950's, all areas of the state considered to be suitable wild turkey habitat have received transplanted birds. There are at this time about 25 Merriam's turkey flocks with huntable populations occurring in seven areas of the state. Wild turkeys have been hunted in Montana since 1958 with the hunter harvest varying from about 90 to nearly 1,000 birds a year.

"When available, the seeds of ponderosa pine are a preferred food."

Merriam's turkey habitat in Montana is generally restricted to open ponderosa pine woodlands in rugged terrain. Turkeys have been most successful in woodlands where about one-half of the vegetative cover consists of ponderosa pine with the remainder grasses, deciduous trees, and shrubs in scattered openings and drainageways throughout the woodland.

In summer, especially in southeastern Montana, grasslands receive a great deal of use by turkeys. During winter, turkeys move into lower drainages that are occupied by deciduous trees and shrubs. Properly distributed small openings and a mosaic of vegetative types that maximizes the edge effect are essential elements of good turkey habitat.

Food

Merriam's turkey eat a wide variety of nuts, seeds, fruits, tubers, flower heads, green leaves, and insects. When available, the seeds of ponderosa pine are a preferred food. Fruits and berries in the turkey's diet vary from year to year depending on their availability. Cultivated grain--oats, barley, and wheat--are eaten when available, especially during winter. Frequently, the better turkey populations occur in the vicinity of grain fields. Snowberry, bearberry, hawthorn, serviceberry, chokecherry, and rose hips are eagerly taken by turkeys as are grasshoppers and spiders. A number of turkey populations subsist through the winter on grain provided by landowners.

Habitat Management Suggestions

Management of wild turkey habitat in Montana woodlands depends on the maintenance of relatively open stands of ponderosa pine with adequate ground cover and a variety of age classes from pole size to mature and over-mature trees.

Selective cutting during timber harvest to preserve roost trees; thinning dense sapling stands, creating small opening during harvest; seeding of grasses and legumes in woodland openings, skid trails, and haul roads following logging; prescribed burning to reduce

understory debris; and providing water where unavailable are practices beneficial to wild turkeys.