

# Law Enforcement Session

## The Detection and Apprehension of Wild Turkey Law Violators in East Central Georgia

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*Abstract:* Conservation rangers in the Georgia Thomson Law Enforcement District made a total of 151 cases for illegal turkey hunting during the 5-year period beginning in 1980. The most prevalent violation was hunting over bait—47 (31.1%), followed by hunting without a big game license—18 (11.9%), hunting without permission—13 (8.6%), hunting out of season—12 (8.0%), hunting without a license—11 (7.3%), hunting with unplugged gun—11 (7.3%), hunting from public road—10 (6.6%), hunting with illegal weapon (rifle)—10 (6.6%), hunting with illegal ammunition—7 (4.7%), hunting from a vehicle—7 (4.6%), and possession of illegal wildlife (turkey)—5 (3.3%). Penalties ranged from a \$1,000 fine and 2 years of probation for possession of a hen turkey to nothing (case dismissed) for hunting without a big game license. Methods employed to detect and apprehend deliberate and incidental turkey poachers are discussed.

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The eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) was reintroduced into east central Georgia during the early 1950s. The restocking was successful and through dispersal has resulted in establishing an excellent turkey population in the eastern Piedmont counties. Spring gobbler hunting began in 1963. Turkey season currently spans a 6-week period beginning the third Saturday in March and ends during the first week of May. Turkey poaching has been and continues to be a problem. Several studies point out the prevalence of poaching in established turkey populations (Wilson and Lewis 1959, Powell 1967, Wright and Speake 1975, Fleming and Speake 1976). The purpose of this paper is to present the results of efforts to control turkey poaching by conservation rangers and to describe techniques used to detect and apprehend violators.

## Methods

This study involved a 7-county area in the northern half of the Thomson Law Enforcement District including Columbia, Hancock, Lincoln, McDuffie, Warren, Wilkes, and Taliaferro counties. The typical Piedmont terrain varies from slightly rolling to very hilly with elevation varying from 300 to 600 feet above sea level. The major timber type is pine-hardwood (*Pinus taeda*, *P. echinata*, *Quercus alba*, *Q. falcata*). The area is interspersed with oak ridges, hardwood bottoms, pine uplands, croplands, pastures, clearcuts, and numerous small streams.

This section of Georgia is known as one of the best deer and turkey hunting areas of the state. Most hunting land in this area is leased by hunting clubs. Most hunting clubs lease 600-acre tracts, but some lease several thousand acres.

Information presented was obtained by interviewing conservation rangers from the Thomson Law Enforcement District and by reviewing citations issued for turkey law violations from 1980 through 1984.

## Results and Discussion

### Violations Detected and Disposition of Cases

Conservation rangers made a total of 151 cases for illegal turkey hunting from 1980 through 1984. The number of violations varied by year from 7 in 1982 to 51 in 1984, averaging 30.2 per year. Violations were as follows: hunting over bait, 47 (31.1%); hunting without big game license, 18 (11.9%); hunting without permission, 13 (8.6%); hunting out of season, 12 (8.0%); hunting without license, 11 (7.3%); hunting with unplugged gun, 11 (7.3%); hunting from public road, 10 (6.6%); hunting with illegal weapon (rifle), 10 (6.6%); hunting with illegal ammunition, 7 (4.7%); hunting from a vehicle, 7 (4.6%); and possession of illegal wildlife (turkey), 5 (3.3%).

The most frequently occurring violation (31.1%) was hunting over bait. Of the 47 cases made, 45 were made during the legal spring hunting season. Bait apparently was used by inexperienced hunters to give themselves an added advantage in bagging a turkey. The majority of baiting violations, 74.5% (35 of 47), occurred on hunting clubs and were discovered during the first week of turkey season.

Violations occurring outside the prescribed turkey season totaled 26 (17.2%). Of these, 11 occurred during February, 10 in October, 3 in August and 2 in March. Violations were as follows: hunting out of season, 12; hunting from public road, 4; hunting from a vehicle, 4; hunting over bait, 2; hunting with illegal weapon, 2; hunting without permission, 1; and possession of illegal wildlife (turkey), 1.

In most cases, persons apprehended for turkey violations appeared before a county probate judge. Some violations were settled in County Superior Court. There were inconsistencies in fines levied for turkey violations between counties and in some cases within the same county. Usually a second offense resulted in a higher fine. Penalties ranged from \$1,000 and 2 years probation for possession of a hen turkey to nothing (case dismissed) for hunting without a big game license. The aver-

age amount paid per violation per year over the study period was as follows: 1980, \$62.42; 1982, \$134.68; 1982, \$127.00; 1983, \$207.80; and 1984, \$155.10. Three warnings were issued in 1984. A total of 18 cases still are pending. The increase in fines probably was due to increased pressure on the courts by concerned sportsmen and landowners to discourage illegal hunting activities in the respective counties.

A relatively new program initiated by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources called Project TIP (Turn In Poachers) and another sponsored by the Georgia Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, have aided in the reporting of turkey violations by the public. Project TIP pays a \$100 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of turkey law violators. The Wild Turkey Federation pays \$100 if a turkey was actually killed illegally. A total of 18 people have collected rewards from the TIP program since it began in October 1982.

### Types of Poachers

Turkey poachers can be divided into 2 categories: those who deliberately take turkeys illegally; and the opportunist who illegally takes turkeys incidentally to other types of hunting, usually deer or squirrel hunting during fall and winter.

Deliberate turkey poachers usually hunt over bait, hunt with calls before the season or exceed the bag limit. Another deliberate turkey poacher is the "road rider." He usually rides back roads very slowly through good turkey country. When birds are spotted in the road, woodland or field, he may shoot from the vehicle or step out and shoot. Road riders usually hunt with small caliber deer rifles (.222 or .243) with high powered scopes. Road riders often shoot deer as well as turkeys, particularly during fall and winter.

### Locating Violations

The technique utilized by conservation rangers to locate bait sites begins by checking entrances to hunting clubs starting about 3 weeks before season opens. Vehicular traffic at this time of year normally indicates an interest in turkeys. Club members could be pre-season scouting but they also could be hunting before season. Heavy traffic (2-3 times per week) may indicate baiting. Corn is used most often to bait turkeys. The best approach to investigate for baiting is to walk into the club, follow signs and locate where the vehicle has been parking. Check the parking spot closely for spilled corn on the ground where the baiter pours it from a bag into a smaller container. From here, attempt to locate likely bait sites. Most bait sites found within the study area have been located on a hardwood hillside adjacent to pine uplands. The bait is scattered in the open hardwoods and a blind(s) built in the edge of the pine upland which has more dense understory. Another way to locate bait sites is to listen for crows and blue jays which also are attracted to bait sites and usually are quite noisy. Conscientious rangers always check around deer stands. Often a hunter seeing turkeys from his deer stand in the fall will think it is a good place to bait during spring.

A turkey hunter without a turkey call in the woods is rare, but it is common for a person hunting over bait not to have a turkey call. When checking hunters coming

out of the woods the ranger may feign interest in turkey calls and ask the hunter what type of call he uses and even ask for a calling demonstration. If the hunter does not have a call or cannot use it properly, the ranger should come back later and check for bait.

On at least 3 occasions, successful turkey hunters have reported finding corn in the crops of birds they have taken legally. The ranger obtains the location the bird was bagged and usually locates the bait site nearby.

The best approach to apprehend a baiting violator is arrive at the hunting site before he does, hide your vehicle, and wait under cover until he arrives. Most violators hunt bait sites during daylight, but some will hunt them during the afternoon. Other activities that should make a ranger suspicious of baiting are reports of multiple kills of turkeys on a particular hunting club, especially on the first weekend of the season, reports of multiple shots or shooting every Sunday morning. The ranger can get this information while on routine patrol by asking hunters he encounters daily.

One method employed to apprehend road hunters is to use a mounted specimen. The mounted turkey is placed on a setting easily seen in a location where reports have been received of road hunting. A ranger stakes out the bird and waits for the poacher to drive by. A total of 4 cases have been made using this method. Once apprehended, the poacher usually pleads entrapment. Some criticism has been received about this technique from hunters and some county courts. Another productive method of catching road hunters is to locate a flock of turkeys feeding in a pasture adjacent to a road in a rural area, hide your vehicle, and simply watch the birds feed. This method is particularly effective in late afternoon.

Informants played less of a role in the detection of violators than might be expected. Only 35 (23.2%) of the 151 cases made during the study period were reported to rangers by informants; however, in 1984, nearly half of the cases made by rangers (24 of 52) resulted from information supplied by informants.

Many violations, like hunting out of season and hunting without permission, often require a little ingenuity on the part of the ranger to capture the violator. Although some illegal hunters are dropped off on a roadway and picked up at a pre-arranged time, most drive a vehicle and park where they hunt. Once the vehicle of a suspected violator is located, the hunter can be checked out by (1) waiting for the hunter to return to his vehicle, (2) locating him in the woods by the sound of a turkey call, or (3) blowing the horn. The hunter often will return to his vehicle thinking something is wrong.

In summary, conservation rangers in the Thomson District have developed several techniques that have proved successful in detecting and apprehending turkey poachers. Illegal hunting will no doubt continue as long as turkeys are present. Employing the techniques described in this report can reduce the number of turkeys taken by illegal hunting methods.

**Literature Cited**

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