

A SURVEY OF FLORIDA DEER AND TURKEY HABITATS AND POPULATIONS

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In May, 1947 a state-wide deer and turkey survey was undertaken as a part of Florida's Pittman-Robertson program. Field work on the project was completed in June, 1948. This survey was designed to accomplish four objectives:

1. To determine the number and location of deer and turkey.
2. To determine the location, extent, and character of deer and turkey habitat.
3. To locate areas from which deer and turkey could be trapped for restocking purposes.
4. To obtain information on areas that might be leased or purchased for eventual use as managed hunting areas.

The information resulting from the survey will be published in the form of a booklet with appropriate maps for use as a practical guide to the proper management of deer and turkey in the state.

METHODS

The survey was conducted largely through field work, and interviews with wildlife officers and other informed persons in each of the 67 counties. Available maps showing topographic features and vegetation types were utilized throughout the study. The steps in the general procedure in conducting the survey of each county were as follows:

1. Become familiar with the various kinds of maps dealing with the county in question. The more one knows of the county to be worked the better will be the cooperation from the local residents. The added knowledge will improve the quality and accuracy of information gained.
2. Contact the best qualified wildlife officer for a conference and field work. This selection should be carefully made, because jealousy often exists between the field personnel. On the other hand, some time should be spent with each officer in the county. This gives the worker several viewpoints and at the same time insures better cooperation from these officers for future work.
3. Inspect the occupied and unoccupied deer and turkey range. One should visit as much of the range as possible. An inspection was made of at least each type of habitat in the county.
4. Contact individuals other than wildlife officers that might be of assistance. Largely for the public relations values, as many sportsmen as time permitted were contacted. Both urban and rural residents were solicited for their thoughts even though very little of the material could be used.
5. Visit the County Agent and secure information on acreage of the county that is in improved pasture lands and farm lands. Explain the program to him and get his ideas on game numbers and areas that may be leased or bought.

6. Write the individual county reports using a standard outline prepared at the beginning of the survey. Special effort should be made to write field notes while actually in the field, and by all means, the county write-ups should be prepared soon after completion of the work.

The quality of information obtained from Wildlife Officers varies a great deal according to the individual. Extreme caution must be exercised in accepting or rejecting the average man's ideas as to habitat value, game population and its location. So many officers contend that the game population was extremely low when they started to work, and now, as he would say, "the woods are full of game."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This 14-month survey revealed a deer population of 32,466 in 63 counties. Only 4 counties do not have deer. There are 10 counties with a population of 1,000 or more; 13 counties have from 499 to 1,000; 7 counties have from 250 to 499; 16 counties have from 100 to 249; and 17 counties have from 1 to 99. There are no forest areas of 100,000 acres or more that do not have a remnant of a deer herd. The counties without deer are devoted to agriculture and are divided into small rural ownerships.

The turkey population was estimated to be 26,854. There are 7 counties with a population of 1,000 or more; 9 counties with 500 to 999; 16 counties with 250 to 499; 12 counties with 100 to 249; 18 counties with 1 to 99; and 5 without a population.

The deer and turkey range has been divided into two classifications— "good" and "habitable." "Good" habitat is that type of range that will support a desirable population for the entire year. "Habitable" habitat is that type of range that maintains only a very small population throughout all seasons. In this classification will fall areas that support a desirable amount of game for only short periods of time and then, due to a decrease in food or cover or both, this population is forced to move elsewhere.

Florida has 14,209,000 acres of good deer range and 9,436,000 designated as habitable. The good habitat for turkey is 14,309,000 acres and that termed habitable is 8,727,400 acres. In judging a habitat according to its value for food and cover only a very little of the total will be desirable for only one of the two species.

The carrying capacity for deer and turkey on much of the Florida range has come in for much speculation. Of course no detailed study of this point has been completed, but several areas of high populations have been carefully observed. The Eglin Military Reservation represents an area with a fairly high deer population. This area contains 461,000 acres of sandy ridges and spring branches. The dominant wood vegetation is turkey oak, pine, upland willow oak and post oak on the ridges and titi and pine along the small stream. The estimated population of 5,500 deer gives one deer to 83.8 acres. No serious damage to the range is apparent at present.

A 60,000 acre tract in Duval County has an approximate turkey population of 700. These figures give one bird to 85.7 acres. This area is a series of low sand ridges forested with turkey oak, upland willow oak and pine. There are also numerous branches and cypress ponds throughout the area. The ridges here are

much more open than on similar soils in Eglin Field. A 22,000 acre plantation in Jefferson County has approximately one turkey to 55 acres. Numerous other areas could be cited, but we still know very little as to the desirable carrying capacity of Florida game habitats.

Some areas are greatly reduced in value for game by man's activities. There are numerous areas that have been classified as not desirable for deer or turkey because of the disturbance from man. This disturbance can be further divided into "intentional" and "unintentional." Both deer and turkey will tolerate a considerable amount of "unintentional" disturbance. Disturbance designated as "intentional" is of course dependent upon education and law enforcement and is not of primary concern in this report. Field observations indicate that deer will adjust themselves to "unintentional" disturbance more readily than turkey.

Trapping

Deer trapping in the state will be extremely difficult. The reason for this is that on the areas that are available for trapping the population is relatively low and the animals apparently are never pressed for food. Several plantation owners in the northern part of the state have indicated their willingness to permit taking as many deer as possible from their holdings. It is doubtful whether the deer population is great enough in any of these areas to make trapping profitable.

There are several areas from which turkeys may be trapped. The plan is to remove from an area in South Florida about 300 turkeys per year for the next five years. This can be done without injury to the breeding stock of the particular area. A second area is in the Apalachicola River bottom where all available turkey range will be flooded by the construction of the Jim Woodruff Dam. The entire population will be removed from this area if possible.

Restocking

Recommendations for restocking have been made for large blocks of game habitat on which public hunts will eventually be held. The smaller public hunting areas are second on the list for restocking and private hunting clubs or private pastures will be considered last. It is thought that 200 deer a year for the next five years will restock all desirable range. The restoration of turkey will take longer. Probably 200 turkeys each year for the next 8 years will be required in this program.

Some individuals and sportsmen's organizations are requesting that restocking be done with domesticated or semi-domesticated turkeys. This practice should not be accepted by the state as an important part of its restoration program. Several private clubs have managed to maintain a fair population of turkeys by the use of domestic stock and by making yearly releases. This is possible because they regulate the kill and do not object to the inferior sporting qualities of the bird. On areas that are to be hunted by the general public this semi-tame turkey would not survive the first hunting season.

Management suggestions have been made for each county. A typical suggestion reads like this: "Obtain control of the wildlife on 100,000 acres along east bank of Choctawhatchee River in Bay County and restock with deer and turkey and see that the area has ample protection from illegal hunting." In some counties there is

very little territory worthy of development for deer and turkey, while there are others that are practically all good game range. Many of the counties have at least one good sized block of deer and turkey habitat but only a very small population of game. Where areas can not be leased or bought, Florida can close a portion of, or an entire county, for restocking management. This is possible through the Constitutional Amendment that removes game administration from the control of the legislature. This authority will probably be used repeatedly in the restoration program.

Actually the total acreage seriously needing restocking is relatively small. This is true for both deer and turkey. The acres needing deer restocking are slightly more than those needing turkey. Approximately 2,337,000 acres of turkey range needs restocking, and deer restocking is necessary on 2,712,000 acres. The state has numerous areas that have a very small population of either deer or turkey or both and yet it is being hunted each year. Some of this type of habitat is included in the above figures. The hunter is successful enough to keep the population killed back to a very few units. Under intensive management and protection these small populations could be built up to a desirable population, and often restocking would not be absolutely necessary. Even though one has a fair-size herd of deer or flock of turkeys on a proposed restoration area, the introduction of extra game has an important psychological effect on the community in securing needed cooperation.