

THE AERIAL DROP METHOD OF RELEASING WILD TRAPPED TURKEYS FOR RESTOCKING PURPOSES

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The Game Management Division of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has been trapping, banding and restocking wild turkeys for the past decade. During this period, several methods of transporting and releasing these wild trapped turkeys have been employed. Each year during the months of January and February, approximately two hundred wild turkeys are trapped from the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area in Glades County, Florida and released in suitable turkey habitat that is open to public hunting throughout south Florida.

Formerly these birds were loaded into carrying crates on the back of a pick-up truck and transported to the release site. This would necessitate confining the birds for as much as 8 to 10 hours and on some occasions overnight, depending upon the distance between the trap site and the release point. Since the wild turkey is by nature a strongly freedom loving creature, attempted escape is continuous throughout the period of confinement. Self-inflicted trauma was common, the turkeys scalping themselves and rubbing their necks raw regardless of how smooth the inside of the carrying crate was constructed. Mortality figures between the trap site and the release points averaged about four percent each year. In addition, many birds released with severely scalped heads and necks probably fell victim to shock and screwworms after release. No definite figures of course are available on this mortality factor.

During the 1956 trapping season, several discussions were held in regard to the feasibility of dropping wild turkeys out of an airplane and near the end of the trapping period, it was decided to "sacrifice" one turkey in an attempt to show the possibilities of such a release. The turkey, a subadult hen, was put into a burlap bag, tied securely around the feet and loaded into one of the Commission's Super cubs. Upon reaching the area above the proposed release site, the turkey was untied, removed from the bag and held by hand. The pilot, holding the plane at approximately 200 feet altitude, put down the flaps slowing the plane to about 45 miles per hour airspeed. The turkey was thrown down and out from the plane and was in a free fall for only 20 to 30 feet at which time the bird righted itself and went into a long glide.

During the 1958 season, all of the trapped turkeys, with the exception of those released in the near vicinity of the trap sites, were released by this air drop method. To date, mortality between the trap sites and the release points for the air released birds is 0 percent and not a single bird has failed to regain it's equilibrium from the free fall and glide to the ground. The confinement period has been reduced to two to three hours from the time the turkeys are trapped and the birds are unable to scalp themselves in the burlap bags. In addition to greatly reducing the confinement period and mortality rate, it is possible to restock areas that are completely inaccessible to ordinary means of transportation. While sportsmen do reach these areas during the hunting season by traveling one or two days in specially constructed swamp vehicles, thus making these turkeys accessible to the hunter, it would be impractical both physically and financially to attempt to release turkeys in these areas other than by the air drop method.

Since the initiation of the turkey restoration program in Florida, 1,210 turkeys have been trapped, banded and released throughout the State. We have received notification of 96 kills for approximately an 8 percent band return. Of these 1,210 releases, 94 turkeys have been released from the air. While it is still too early to determine band return percentages since most of these turkeys were air released in January and February of this year, it is logical to assume that a greater percentage of these birds will survive to reproduce since the self-inflicted damage factor has been eliminated.

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