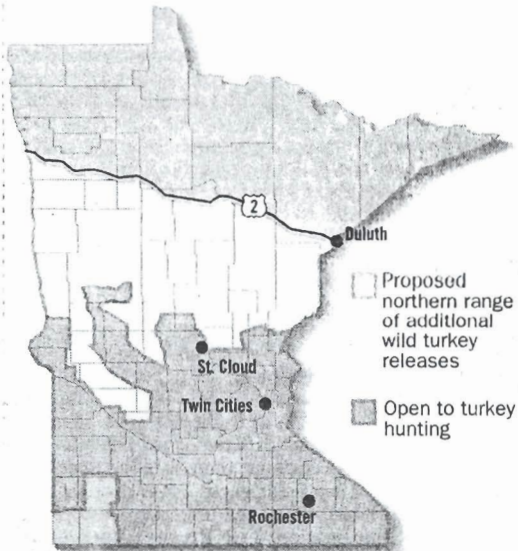


7/15/01 (Bill Marchel)

Northern exposure

Scientists and hunters hope to learn soon how far north wild turkeys can live in Minnesota

Wild turkey expansion in Minnesota



PIONEER PRESS



BILL MARCHEL / SPECIAL TO THE PIONEER

A Minnesota DNR employee and a volunteer release a wild turkey tom in northern Minnesota in a mix of farm and woods.

An intriguing wildlife debate is gaining momentum in Minnesota that could soon answer a long-elusive question:

How far north can wild turkeys survive in the United States? On Wednesday, Minnesota's spring wild turkey season opens, and about 20,000 hunters will be licensed to pursue birds during eight time periods that end May 27.

But few hunters will pursue the birds in zones north of St. Cloud, where the



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expansion of wild turkeys is a new thing.

The wild-turkey explosion in southern Minnesota and the Minnesota River Valley is considered a hugely successful wildlife story. Birds have been successfully relocated by the Department of Natural Resources with financial help from the National Wild Turkey Federation, which has 11,000 state members.

But questions linger about the birds' viability in northern Minnesota because of low temperatures and the lack of turkey-friendly foods.

In recent years, turkeys have flourished in Becker and Ottertail counties — some of the northernmost release sites in the state — but a group of 18 birds released near Milaca this winter

didn't fare well.

Fourteen of them died, either from starvation or predation by bobcats or gray wolves.

Department of Natural Resources biologists discovered the deaths after outfitting the birds with radio transmitters and monitoring them.

Wild turkeys live in Ontario and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the latter of which gets 80 to 100 inches of each winter. Biologists once identified a "line of death" in Minnesota where inches of snow for more than 30 weeks was believed to make wild turkey inhabitation impossible, but that line has become blurred in recent years.

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"We now know that newly released turkeys will experience starvation and predation, caused by malnourishment, when snow limits access to food and mobility," said Dick Kimmel, the DNR's turkey biologist. "We have questions on alternative food sources for northern released turkeys and how to manage turkeys with food plots in the north."

St. Cloud State assistant professor Bill Faber hopes to get to the bottom of the issue. He has applied for a \$50,000 grant from the National Wild Turkey Federation that would help pay for a proposed four-year study of wild turkeys in central and northern Minnesota.

"We're going to compare the importance of food plots, such as standing corn, to wild turkeys versus areas where turkeys don't have access to food plots," Faber said. "We also want to document winter predation."

Faber hopes to release 120 wild turkeys in six sites from St. Cloud eastward to the St. Croix River.

Some sites would have food plots, while others would not in order to examine the difference in survival. The birds would be outfitted with radio transmitters, and students would monitor their survival. The study would cost \$150,000 the first year and about \$70,000 annually after that.

It would be the first large-scale study of northern wild turkey survival in the northern United States, Faber said.

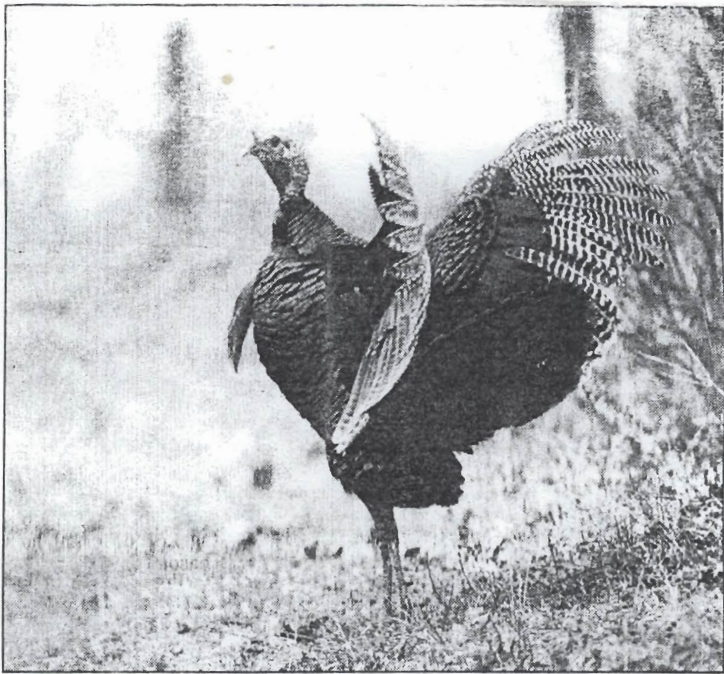
The National Wild Turkey Federation has taken a strong interest in the research because hunters would like to see more birds relocated farther north in Minnesota. Tom Glines, regional representative for the federation, has said the group would like to see birds relocated as far north as U.S. 2, which cuts east-west across the state from East Grand Forks to Duluth.

Last summer DNR officials designed a draft plan to place eight releases from Milaca northwest to Kittson County over the next five years.

Turkeys can withstand cold weather, that much is known.

In a recent study, DNR biologist Kurt Haroldson found that wild turkeys can withstand temperatures to minus-40, even though the birds have bare heads and bare legs. (Other game birds, such as sharp-tailed and ruffed grouse, have feathered legs.)

However, wild turkeys, like all wild animals, need lots of food to



CRAIG BORCK / PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

Early Minnesota explorers, such as Father Hennepin, likely encountered native wild turkeys in southern Minnesota, but not in the northern part of the state where winter conditions are harsher.

sustain them through cold winters. For the most part, wild turkeys, which are omnivorous, feed on ground foods, such as acorns and insects. When snow gets too deep, the birds have difficulty scratching for food. Without calories and protein, they die.

But some curious facts have surfaced regarding Minnesota's northern wild turkeys.

"Turkeys near Detroit Lakes survived the severe winters we experienced during the 1990s," Kimmel said. "According to the wildlife manager in the area, the turkeys survived without using food plots and were known to bud on species like hazel.

"A big difference there could be whether turkeys experience a severe winter after they've acclimated to an area and have some experience with local foods," Kimmel said. "I've also heard reports from Ontario of turkeys budding on aspen, much like ruffed grouse. We have much to learn about wild turkeys in northern areas."

The key issue for northern turkeys is food. Can they survive without extra help from the DNR and supplemental feeding? Can a minimal amount of state money be spent to produce food plots? Or can the northern birds find enough food on their own to survive northern winters?

There's one indisputable fact:

There are more wild turkeys in Minnesota today than before white settlement.

In fact, some ornithologists dispute whether wild turkeys are native to Minnesota because no museum specimens have surfaced.

But Aldo Leopold, the famed wildlife researcher, reported in 1931 that Minnesota's turkey range likely extended from Rock County in the southwest, through the Minnesota River Valley near Mankato and to the state's eastern border near Lake Pepin, Kimmel said.

His reports were based on sightings by explorers such as Jonathon Carver and Father Hennepin.

"I assume from these historical reports that turkeys did exist in Minnesota prior to settlement and were extirpated from Minnesota by the 1880s because of unregulated hunting, including market hunting, and reduced habitat from timber cutting during settlement," Kimmel said.

Now the question is: Can wild turkeys survive from the Iowa border to Grand Rapids? Crookston to Carlton? The answers may be known sooner rather than later.

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