

Should We Feed Wild Turkeys?

Biologically, artificial feeding is not the best approach to helping wild turkeys. Long-term habitat management aimed at increasing the suitability to turkeys year-around as well as during extremes of winter is the best investment. The Department advocates proper habitat management (which does not include artificial feeding) to promote a naturally sustaining wild turkey population. Some areas of the state contain very restrictive feeding regulations; in some cases it's entirely prohibited. Please refer to the current regulations on [Baiting and Feeding of Wildlife](#) and the [Turkey Hunting Regulations](#) for more information.

A frequently asked question during Wisconsin winters is whether it is advisable to begin artificially feeding wild turkeys, especially during periods of sub-zero weather and deep snow. This question is not new, as artificial winter feeding of wildlife has been argued, debated and practiced for years. And, people DO spend thousands of dollars per year in Wisconsin to keep their bird feeders filled, don't they? Let's review the facts in the case of artificial winter feeding.

Wild turkeys, like other species of wildlife, need food, shelter, and cover in order to survive. They existed in Wisconsin long before there were people available to ponder such issues as winter feeding.

All Wisconsin winters are not the same. For example, the winter of 1995-96 was recorded as one of the most severe on record. The impacts of this fairly severe winter on the turkey flock were negligible - the harvest in spring 1996 was the highest recorded at the time. However, most people intuitively feel that deep snow and prolonged sub-zero temperatures can have a negative impact on the turkey population.

So, what extremes of snow and temperatures can turkeys withstand?

Wild turkeys in Wisconsin are tough birds. From historical records, A. W. Schorger traced the expansion and contraction of the northern limits of turkey range in Wisconsin during the 1800's in response to winter weather. This environmental tug-of-war can be seen today where turkeys have been reestablished, which is well past the northern limits of their ancestral range. Research on wild turkeys in Pennsylvania and New York (where winter severity is somewhat close to Wisconsin's) has shown that some turkeys will in fact starve during winters when powdery, deep snow cover the ground for a period of several weeks. But they found that wild turkeys populations can recover in one breeding season and the overall population health and trend is more dependent on the previous summer's reproductive success than winter survival. The average survival of wild turkeys over mild or average winters ranges from 70 to nearly 100%, but severe winters can reduce this survival rate to 55-60% which is still more than enough to provide breeding stock for the next year.

How do turkeys survive?

Turkeys can remain in roosting areas for up to two weeks during especially severe weather and can lose up to forty percent of their body weight before dying of starvation.

Deep, powdery snow is more of a problem than extremely cold weather as it limits the ability of turkeys to forage on the ground. Many areas of Wisconsin's turkey range have south-facing slopes or wind-swept fields that lose snow quickly, allowing turkeys to forage more easily. And, a Minnesota study has shown that substantial amounts of the waste corn remained in the fields throughout the winter. Winter habitat needs appeared to exert the greatest influence on turkey movements in the Midwest oak- hickory region, but there was no conclusive evidence to show that winter foods act in a limiting capacity. Turkeys are one of nature's opportunists, eating everything available including bits of vegetation, weed seeds, waste grain, and even the seeds hidden in the center of burdocks.

What is the impact of artificial winter feeding to turkeys?

Winter feeding of wildlife does more for the person doing the feeding than it does for the intended species. We all like to see nuthatches, finches, and chickadees taking advantage of our backyard bird feeders. In reality, we are impacting only a tiny percentage of the overall population of these species, yet we all enjoy seeing crowds at our bird feeders. Is it any different with turkeys? I'm sure the person carrying a pail of corn out to the far fence line and seeing turkeys using it enjoys the same feeling of self-satisfaction as the person putting out the suet balls and sunflower seeds.

But consider this: Wisconsin's turkey population is estimated to be 300,000 birds (plus or minus a few thousand). A 15 pound turkey will eat 5 pounds of food per week. So, to impact even one third of the state's turkey flock would require 500,000 pounds of feed PER WEEK, and all this feed would have to be delivered to locations where the turkeys could utilize it. The winter home range of wild turkeys is only 160 to 320 acres. It is next to impossible to get the food to a sufficient number of areas where it would affect the survival of significant numbers. Artificial winter feeding would have no long term positive effect on the wild turkey population.

What about the risks to turkeys of artificial winter feeding?

One risk is that turkeys tend to become tame and dependent on the food. Probably more serious is the fact that many landowners begin to become more protective in their attitudes towards turkeys which can foster the opposite effect most sportsmen want. Second, the potential of disease transmission around feeding sites poses another problem. This in fact has happened in parts of Colorado where disease problems caused the removal of the remaining flock so restocking of uninfected birds could take place. Mold, which grows on wet or damp grain (including birdseed at the backyard feeder), can cause respiratory diseases in birds. Third, artificially concentrating turkeys at feeding sites attracts predators and makes them far more vulnerable to predation. Finally, consider the possibility that poaching may increase as a result of artificially concentrating the turkeys at feeding stations.

So, what's the bottom line? Should we feed turkeys, or let nature take its course?

Biologically, artificial feeding is not the best approach to helping wild turkeys. Long-term habitat management aimed at increasing the suitability to turkeys year-around as well as during extremes of winter is the best investment. The department advocates proper habitat management (which does not include artificial winter feeding) to promote

a naturally sustaining wild turkey population in all suitable range. Short term fluctuations in turkey numbers are normal, particularly on the northern edge of the turkey range.

Without a doubt, winter feeding will always be with us as long as people want to help wildlife in any way they think is best. The real benefit in winter feeding of turkeys is that it fills a need for people. It does little, if anything, positive for the turkey population. Any significant local decreases in turkey numbers will be detected during the harvest seasons, and appropriate steps can then be taken to ensure plenty of turkeys remain to allow populations to recover. Because turkeys, like pheasants, are polygamous (one male serves the breeding needs of a number of females), the spring harvest of bearded-only male birds does not impact population trends. Adjustments can be made, if necessary, to permit levels for the fall season when both sexes are legal game.