The outer limits
Wild turkeys put to test at Lac du Flambeau

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Writer/Photographer

Lac du Flambeau, Wis.—Of the 31 wild turkeys released on the Lac du Flambeau (LDF) reservation this past winter, better than one half are entering spring in good condition, according to Larry Wawroniwicz, LDF natural resource director.

The unprecedented introduction effort is designed to test the habitat limits of wild turkeys at northern latitudes and explore the prospect of establishing a huntable population.

Seventeen birds captured in southern Wisconsin with rocket nets were released on the reservation in late January, followed by a flock of 14 several weeks later. Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) staff assisted the LDF Natural Resources Department in fitting a number of second-release turkeys with radio transmitter backpacks to track their movements.

"Overall, the turkeys from the original release are doing pretty well," Wawroniwicz said. "Most of the losses came from birds in the later release. They were more difficult to remove from the net. And, I think the extra handling required to put on the transmitters stressed the birds so that the point they were more vulnerable to exposure and predators."

In the heavily forested Lac du Flambeau region there's no shortage of hungry carnivores. Wawroniwicz said that evidence of Fisher, bobcat, and even possible wolf depredations have claimed turkeys.

"This is probably the longest step we've taken in our turkey release program," said the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Keith Wandke, who helped organize the project. "It's an investigation to learn if wild turkeys can survive in an area without substantial row-cropping."

While forest, marshland, and lakes dominate the region's habitat base, limited agriculture and food plots established through the Circle of Flight program in the mid-1990s offer open spaces and forage. In addition, the Lac du Flambeau reservation is checkerboarded with acorn-producing oak ridges and mature white pine—a favored nesting tree for turkeys.

The turkeys spent late winter browsing on plant material and scratching for organic debris on the forest floor. Based on radio telemetry data and visual observations, Wawroniwicz said that the birds stayed relatively close to the release sites until the mid-February melt-off. "When the snow was gone, the birds became very active, going from the marshes to ridges and everywhere in between," he said.

As the spring breeding season gets underway, Wawroniwicz plans on collecting additional data from gobbling surveys. Male turkeys, or toms, gobble throughout the spring to communicate with other birds, especially hens looking for a mate.

"Certainly a primary goal is to establish a self-sustaining wild turkey population to provide tribal members with hunting opportunities," Wawroniwicz said. "Turkeys that range off the reservation will help create opportunities for non-tribal members as well."

Tribal wildlife managers have ruled out supplemental feeding during the harsh cold-weather months. Still, backyard deer feeders loaded with corn are common throughout the area and could provide hungry turkeys with winter sustenance.

Meanwhile, it's an exercise in waiting out and observing how the turkeys adapt to life on the reservation.

"This project is a good example of partnership between state and tribal agencies," Wandke said. "We are all very interested in seeing what happens."

Two trumpeter swans shot in Dane County

Madison, Wis.—State conservation wardens and wildlife officials are investigating the apparent shooting of two endangered trumpeter swans in Wisconsin.

The swans were recovered in late February near the junctions of State Highway 78 and County Highway H in Dane County, according to Department of Natural Resources Conservation Warden Dave Wood. A necropsy performed on the swans determined that they had been shot with a shotgun.

One bird wearing a neck collar was identified as being a male swan that was banded in the wild at the Chet Meadows Wildlife Area in Burnett County in 1994. Swans released through Wisconsin's trumpeter swan reintroduction program.

The other swan was not collared or banded so officials were unable to determine its origin, said Sunner Matteson, who coordinates the trumpeter swan program for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Bureau of Endangered Resources.

"It would appear this was an intentional shooting, as there were no waterfowl in the area," Matteson said.

Wild turkey range in the ceded territories and GLIFWC member tribes. (Map by Miles Follard, GLIFWC)
Figure 3.—Approximate location of the tension zone (blue line) in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Adapted from Andersen (2005), Curtis (1959), and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (1995).