Bling in your gamebag could mean $100

By Lori D. Richardson
Wildlife Education Specialist

AT4:30 this February morning I'm headed east on I-81 with the radio crankin' me awake. It's dark and the heater struggles to edge out the cold air in the car. I feel small and vulnerable, sharing the road with all the 18-wheelers; I guess they are the only other folks with a reason to be up and about at this hour. But, as they'll continue on their journeys today, I'll soon be (if all goes as planned) hob-knobbin' with some gobblers.

This is my third attempt at turkey trapping this winter with Land Management Officer Dave Mitchell and Bob Eriksen, regional biologist for the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF). The first two days we sat on a bait site in Lehigh County with a very enthusiastic landowner. Bob Ehle has been managing his 110 acres for wildlife for several years. In fact, he's done such a good job providing food and cover for wildlife that the turkeys didn't want to come to the cracked-corn bait.

Without snow on the ground, turkeys are often hard to coerce into a situation where they can be caught by a rocket net and banded. As we sat and watched, those longbeards walked right passed our bait twice the first day, and on the second day, while we heard them carrying on, they never made an appearance. Several days later, Mitchell, Eriksen and Ehle were finally able to bring those gobblers in and band them — but not while I was there. Mitchell called it the "writer's kiss-of-death." Nothing ever goes as planned when a writer or photographer is on the scene.

This day we're hoping for better luck; we'll be on the other side of Lehigh County, at the Saucon Valley Country Club. Mitchell called the afternoon before to let me know he'd been baiting these toms for several days and that they were hitting the bait regularly. He was watching them on the bait as we spoke and said that, although it was against his better judgment, Eriksen had convinced him to wait until the next morning to fire the net, when I could be there. Mitchell hoped the birds would be back; Eriksen was confident they would return.

Arriving at the country club at dawn, I met grounds-crewman Tony Johnston. Eriksen and PGC biologist Jack Gilbert set the charges on the rocket net while Mitchell laid the bait line and Johnston trimmed tree limbs to keep them from fouling the net.

As the roar of the chainsaw drifted away, I heard a gobble and looked to Mitchell for confirmation. The birds had roosted off in the direction from which the gobble came, so we finished up, moved the trucks back a comfortable distance away from the site, pulled the trigger wire inside one of the trucks, settled in and waited.

We'd been sitting only about an hour and a half when our radio crackled, "We've got gobblers comin' in," whispered Mitchell.

The birds were way off to our right, coming out of the spruces. Mitchell, Eriksen and Johnston sat in a truck to our right, which blocked my and Gilbert's view. As the birds were still a ways off, we were able to turn on the truck to roll the window down and secure a clear view of the trap site.

The cold, which had been creeping into my toes, came pouring through the window, but now, with the excitement of the birds coming in, I was suddenly warm.

Far off, I could make out the movement of dark, shadowy figures near the ground. They weaved in and out of sight behind trees and swells in the ground. Eventually they moved into view. Four, no six… wait… ten, holy cow, there were more… 14, 18 and counting.

(Left) A layer of straw covers the net in this ground set. ERIKSEN works on one rocket, the other two are visible behind the line of straw to his left. A line of bait is in front of the net. Turkeys must be feeding, heads down, within two feet of the net, to fire safely and catch birds. The net travels 45 feet in 3/4 of a second. (Right) Artillery smokeless powder makes up the rocket charge. The 2-piece rocket can be seen on the ground below.

Eight gobblers came strutting, fans-out, across the green toward the 8th hole where we were parked. In total, 32 birds were headed our way.

The turkeys dinked around, zig-zagging through spruces and sand traps. At one point I thought they were going to head back into the woods.

Then the hens made a beeline for the bait, they ran — literally ran — to the bait line. It was wild to watch. I guess they were trying to get some of the bait into their crops before the gobblers got there and chased them off.

One of the last gobblers to arrive came in at a full strut. He was spectacular; absolutely da-man. The sun was just right, and brilliant colors bounced off his regal feathers. He was beautiful. I was entranced.

BANG!

The net shot out into the air, the sound of the rockets echoed, birds and feathers flew every which way, and the guys leapt out of the trucks and sprinted to the net to secure the turkeys they'd caught, all while a cloud of smoke drifted slowly through the chaos. I breathed in the heavy smell of gunpowder.

WOW! What a way to start the day. That gobbler will be even more hip sporting the bling-bling of a new legband, I thought.

Why are we trapping these toms?

The NWTF and three state wildlife agencies are conducting a 4-year study to estimate the harvest rates of spring gobblers in Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York. Each state received 300 bands to fit to male turkeys this winter, before the spring hunting seasons. In Pennsylvania, the 300 bands were dispersed across the state, 50 to each region. The PGC — like the wildlife agencies in Ohio and New York — is providing personnel and equipment to capture and band 300 birds each year of the study. NWTF is covering the cost of the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit at Penn State to coordinate the tri-state effort and analyze the data.

Each aluminum leg band will be secured to a male turkey's leg, and each band has a unique letter-num-

(Left) IT TAKES THREE rockets to propell the 57x35 foot net. In a box-net set, the net is folded into a large metal box, the rockets are fired from the top of the box and pull the net out over the bait. The bait in a box-net set runs perpendicular to the box. Bait can be seen above the center rocket between two stakes. (Right) Thirty-two turkeys came in to the bait, including this strutting gobbler. The box-net is off screen to the right.


1.


2.


3.


4.


5.

ber combination. Each band is also imprinted with a toll-free telephone number with which to report a harvest or recovery of the banded bird.

Perhaps the most exciting news for spring turkey hunters is that half of the birds being banded will also have information on the band indicating that a reward of $100 will be paid if the band is reported before July of 2009. NWTF is covering the cost of the rewards. In Pennsylvania, 150 birds, 25 in each region, will be wearing these special incentive bands.

Duane Diefenbach, who is heading up the study at the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit says, "For many game species we have estimates of how many animals are harvested, but what we typically lack is knowing the harvest rate — the percentage of the population taken by hunters — because we lack population estimates. This study, for the first time, will provide an estimate of harvest rates for turkey gobblers in Ohio, New York and Pennsylvania."

In addition to estimating harvest rates of male turkeys during the spring season, the research unit will also be able to estimate the state-wide population and annual survival rate of male turkeys.

PGC wild turkey biologist Mary Jo Caselana adds, "The multi-state approach provides a larger sample and, thus, a better understanding of the variability in harvest rates. It will allow comparisons of

GILBERT and ERIKSEN carefully take one of the turkeys caught at the Saucon Valley Country Club out of the net (1). Each male is fitted with a rivet-band on the right leg (2) and a butt-end band on the left (3). The beard length is measured and recorded (4) as well as the spur length (5) before each bird is released on-site. Feathers from both male and female turkeys are being collected for a forensic DNA database (6). After all the birds are processed, the net is carefully folded back into the box and packed for transport to the next trapping site (7).

harvest and survival rates among the three states, with their varying harvests, hunter numbers and hunter densities."

Casalena also says, "Age-specific harvest rate information will enable the state agencies to predict the effect of spring turkey seasons on the age-structure of the male turkey population. Recent research has found that harvest rates vary among age classes of wild turkeys and can greatly influence the number of adult gobblers in the spring harvest."

A sub-study on band retention rates is also being conducted. The bands being used for the harvest rate study are rivet bands — an aluminum band that is secured using a stainless steel rivet. It is virtually impossible for a turkey to loose a rivet band. National Band & Tag Company has donated a selection of butt-end bands to evaluate how well each of four different types stay on wild turkeys. The retention rates of butt-end aluminum, anodized aluminum, enameled aluminum and stainless steel bands will be evaluated.

We caught four adult males and five adult females at the country club. Each of the males is now fitted with a rivet band on his right leg, as part of the harvest rate study, and one of the four different types of butt-end bands on his left leg, as part of the band retention study. Two out of the four rivet bands offer $100 rewards for being reported.

While the five hens we caught won't be part of this study, the PGC is gathering breast feathers from both male and female turkeys for the Northeast Wildlife DNA Laboratory at East Stroudsburg University. The feathers will be used to help build a forensic DNA database and will be placed in a long term DNA archive for future studies.

In addition to everything we'll be learning about wild turkeys through these efforts, we'll also be able to learn a little bit about humans — turkey hunters in particular.

The Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit will be able to estimate reporting rates by comparing the number of $100 reward bands reported to the number of non-reward bands reported. Reporting rate estimates help biologists determine harvests and may enable them to compare results from previous studies that didn't use rewards.

Who would've guessed we could learn so much from a few turkeys. No, not Mitchell and Eriksen — the actual turkeys.

Thanks for a great day, guys!□


6.


7.