

OF THE OUTDOORS: Weather A Key For Spring Turkeys

BY GARY HOWEY
Hartington, Neb.

Each spring is different, and this year, I'm wondering what the heck the weatherman was talking about when he said spring had arrived. When I looked out the window prior to the opening of the youth spring turkey season and there was 8-10 inches of snow on the ground, I wasn't sure that spring was here. Spring is supposed to be when temperatures begin to rise, turkeys start to gobble their heads off and things green up, right?

This has been a strange spring, as our weather has been weird, not much sun, which is the deciding factor when it comes the turkey-breeding season. We're also experiencing cooler temperatures than normal, along with a lot of clouds, wind, rain and snow during the first part of the turkey season. But, since bad weather hasn't stopped me before, at first, I didn't let it bother me.

Generally, shortly after the season opens, the turkeys break up into their smaller groups, with one dominant gobbler, his hens and a satellite gobbler or two, making them easier to call, but much to my dismay, this spring, they're still in large flocks, making them unbelievably hard to call and decoy, this along with heavy winds, were making it one tough season.

On our first outing, team member Bill Christensen and I planned to take his grandson's Cole and Carson Becker out for their first turkey hunt. We'd been keeping an eye on the birds, trying to figure out what their routine was. I thought we had everything figured, but it wouldn't take long for me to realize that a bird with the brain the size of a walnut could and would fool me once again.

Something had changed, as the birds weren't patterning, as they were wondering here and there. Over the years, the birds were somewhat predictable, always roosting in a big cottonwood in the middle of the property and pitching out into an alfalfa field at first light. This is why earlier, prior to the season, we'd place a heavy bale blind with room for four of us, along the edge of the alfalfa field next to the fence, directly in the path where they'd traveled each day. We'd camouflaged it with Dura-Cover and grass from the surrounding area, making it blend in with the other bales in the field.

The night before the opener, to make sure our plan was on track, I decided to roost the birds. Setting up on road a half mile away with my binoculars waiting for them to go to roost, but as the sun set, the birds moved away from the original roost tree off the alfalfa to the west. This is when I had a feeling that my fool-proof plan was quickly eroding, going down the tube very quickly. When they finally went to roost it was in a tree over a quarter mile away from the blind, which was not what I wanted to see. At the time, it didn't seem like a big problem as I'd called birds in from farther than that, so I didn't give it much thought.

As any hunter does, I'd been keeping an eye on the weather, hoping the weather would be decent and that the chance of rain they'd



Columnist Gary Howey is pictured with his first 2011 Nebraska spring gobbler that followed a dominant hen to his decoys.

been predicting for opening day would diminish. As I headed out the door to meet Bill and the boys, there was no rain, yet there was plenty of moisture in the air, as a heavy fog hung over the area making for poor visibility.

Once we were settled into the blind, I called quietly using a few yelps and purrs, just in case there were birds closer than those in the new roost tree, hoping a gobbler would respond. As things started to lighten up, I increased the volume, hoping to reach those birds in their new roost tree.

As the fog began to lift, off to my left, birds, which I hadn't seen because of the fog, started pitching out of a tree seventy-five yards from us. This shocked me, as they hadn't responded to any of my calls, not a gobble, cluck or purr, nothing! If nothing else, I'd thought the loud calling would have caused the gobbler to shock gobble, but for some reason, they hadn't made a sound.

When they hit the ground, they ignored my calls as well as our decoys, sauntering in the general direction of the other roost tree out into the alfalfa field. About half way up the field, the birds from the other roost joined them and they made their way away from us to feed out into the alfalfa.

Things weren't going as planned and on this trip, we didn't get the boys their birds, but with a couple of weeks left, there's plenty of time for us to figure the birds out, when the hens will be nesting and the gobblers will be out looking, when they'll be more apt to come

to the call.

A week later, I was back in the area, checking things out and spotted several gobblers and hens on the east end of the property, heading in the general direction of the bale blind. If I could get ahead of them, make my way through the trees, set up my decoys and then hunker down in the blind, I might have a chance at filling my first tag. To me, the plan sounded pretty solid, but as I came through the trees, I startled another bunch of turkeys I hadn't seen that had been walking towards the blind from the opposite end.

Thinking that I'd blown it, I set out the decoys quickly and as I climbed into the blind. It didn't take me long to notice our once beautifully camouflaged blind now stuck out like a sore thumb as all of the grass that we'd added to the blind had been blown out by the heavy winds. At this point, I was beginning to believe that this was going to be one of those seasons where nothing would go right.

Well, as my family used to say, "You have to make do with what you've got", so I gathered what was left of the camo, slid it down to one end and started calling with a few clucks and purrs, hoping to keep the birds to the east headed my way. With the heavy north-west winds blowing in their direction, I knew they could hear my calls, but it was impossible for me to hear their response.

Five minutes later as I peered out the blind, one fanned out gobbler, and then two appeared over the ridge line, they along with

several other birds continued to make their way in my direction. Finally a plan was coming together. As the birds came within 200 yards, they started wandering off to the north, so I gave them another call, suddenly, off the end of the blind where I had no visibility, I was startled by several loud gobbles.

Now what do I do, I had a dozen birds out two hundred yards working my way as well as other birds, including several gobblers on the left side of the blind. I could poke my head up out of the blind, spooking the birds in front of me, trying and get a shot at the close birds or stay put, hoping to call the birds off to my left into range. What to do, what to do? It didn't take long for my decision to be made as a hen made it for me. She detected something wasn't right, gave a couple of warning putts, alarming and scattering the birds that had been close to the blind. Luckily for me, the birds coming over the hills hadn't heard her, so I was still in the game.

It was now or never, so I went into my lonesome hen routine, putting, purring and clucking, throwing in an occasional yelp for good measure. This really seemed to impress the gobblers as they were gobbling their heads off, slowly working my way.

Then it happened, the jealous Mama or dominant hen really became upset, doing her best, although unsuccessfully to stop the birds that were wondering away from her.

I knew what needed to be done; I had to get her so upset, so mad that she'd come over to kick the tail feathers out of the loud-mouthed hen attempting to pull her boyfriends away. So I got on her, every time she'd yelp at me, I'd yelp back at her, only louder, this kept up for several minutes before she started heading my way, along with one of the gobblers. The other birds had good seats and were content to stay on the hill and watch the fight that was about to ensue. As the birds got closer, I went into my contented breeding hen purrs, causing the gobbler to head for the scrawny jake decoy that was positioned next to my breeding hen decoy and he wanted in on the action.

As the gobbler came into my decoys at about forty yards, I centered my sights just below his head and fired, and as the bird went down, scattering the remaining birds into parts unknown. If the birds had gotten any closer, our defrocked blind would have been a dead give away.

Finally, the first of my Nebraska spring birds was down and in the days that followed, when the wind wasn't howling, I was able to get several birds within shotgun range, unfortunately, since we couldn't get them on camera, we passed on them.

Later that week, Team member Larry Myhre and I managed to get one on camera that we tagged, we had to work hard to make it happen, giving us bird number 2 in Nebraska.

Weather, during the spring is the major factor when it comes to outdoor activities, especially if you're a spring turkey hunter, making it difficult to do, but with perseverance and adapting to the change, it can be done.

Gary Howey, Hartington, Neb., is the President of Outdoorsmen Productions LLC, which produced the award, winning Outdoorsmen Adventures television series that airs throughout the upper Midwest over the last 16 years. More information on the outdoors can be found at www.outdoorsmenadventures.com.

Outdoors Briefs: Pheasants Forever Names New S.D. Representative

MITCHELL — Pheasants Forever has named Mike Stephenson of Stillwater, Minn., as the organization's new Regional Representative for the state of South Dakota, according to a release this week. Stephenson has been Pheasants Forever's Print/Firearm Registration Assistant at the conservation organization's national office in St. Paul, Minnesota, for the last year.

Stephenson looks to grow Pheasants Forever's presence in South Dakota, which is currently home to 33 Pheasants Forever chapters and more than 5,300 Pheasants Forever members. He will work at raising and expanding funds on wildlife habitat and conservation education, and also with local, state, and federal natural resource agencies on behalf of Pheasants Forever chapters.

Though South Dakota is the state best known for its pheasant population and pheasant hunting, Stephenson, a lifelong pheasant hunter, says it's important to connect more of the 70,000 resident pheasant hunters in South Dakota to Pheasants Forever's wildlife habitat conservation mission.

"Pheasant hunting is too important in this state, both recreationally and economically, not to be more proactive in the conservation of the upland habitat that makes it all possible," Stephenson said, "I look forward to raising Pheasants Forever's profile in the state, increasing membership and showing people the high value of belonging to the nation's leading upland conservation group."

A native of Omaha, Nebraska, Stephenson earned a B.S. in Sports Management from Buena Vista University in Spirit Lake, Iowa. He will work out of his home office in Mitchell, and can be reached at (605) 651-2716 and by email at mailto:mstephenson@pheasantsforever.org.

Free Entrance, Fishing On S.D. State Parks' Weekend

PIERRE — To kick off the summer season, the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks encourages families to spend time outside during the parks' Open House Weekend and Free Fishing Weekend May 20-22.

The annual three-day events allowing people to fish without licenses anywhere in the state and visit state parks and recreation areas without entrance fees. However, camping fees and fishing regulations and limits still apply.

Parks will host a variety of Open House Weekend special events across the state on Saturday, May 21, including:

- Look Up, Look Down, Look All Around Hike, Lewis and Clark Recreation Area near Yankton, 9:30 a.m.
- Step Outside Program, Newton Hills State Park near Canton, 12 - 5 p.m.
- Introduction to Radio Control Airplane Flying, Farm Island Recreation Area near Pierre, 1 - 4 p.m.
- Fantastic Family Fishing, Palisades State Park near Garrettsville, 1 p.m.
- Kids Fishing Tournament, Indian Creek Recreation Area near Moberg, 3 - 5 p.m.
- Hunting for Geeks a.k.a. Geocaching, Lewis and Clark Recreation Area near Yankton, 7 p.m.
- Stick Bread, Newton Hills State Park near Canton, 7 p.m.

Custer State Park will host a number of family activities both Saturday and Sunday of the Open House Weekend, including cook-outs, nature hikes, free hayrack rides, a fishing derby, nature programs and demonstrations. A full schedule of events can be found on the Custer State Park website.

The weekend also marks the first weekend that campsites can be reserved in South Dakota state parks this year, and officials say many campsites are still available. Make reservations by calling 1-800-710-CAMP (2267) or online at www.campsd.com.

For information on fishing, fishing licenses and fishing regulations, or the South Dakota state park system, visit www.gfp.sd.gov or call 605-773-3391.

Sioux Falls-Area Parks To Collect Food, Clothes May 20-22

PIERRE — State parks in eastern South Dakota, in cooperation with the Salvation Army, will kick off the summer season by holding a food and winter clothing drive May 20-22.

Big Sioux Recreation Area near Brandon, Palisades State Park near Garrettsville, Lake Vermillion Recreation Area near Canistota, Newton Hills State Park near Canton, and Lake Herman State Park and Walker's Point Recreation Area near Madison will collect non-perishable food items and quality winter clothes during state parks' Open House Weekend. All park visitors are encouraged to participate.

Minnesota Anglers Adjust To Slot Limits, Better Catches

BY SAM COOK
Duluth (Minn.) News Tribune

DULUTH, Minn. (AP) — "Slot limit" used to be a dirty word. Or two words.

Nobody was keen on the idea of putting back walleyes that otherwise might have wound up in a frying pan.

Deer River fishing guide Jeff Sundin remembers speaking up for a slot limit that was proposed for Lake Winnibigoshish in the late 1990s.

"I was a believer in the first place," Sundin said. "I stumped for it. I lost some friends over it initially. Some have come back around. Some haven't."

Slot limits on northern Minnesota's main walleye lakes have come of age now. The more restrictive limits require anglers to immediately release walleyes in a specific size range, perhaps 17 to 26 inches or 17 to 28 inches.

The first walleye slot limit was established on Rainy Lake in 1994. Mille Lacs went to a slot in 1999. Big Winnie's slot took effect in 2000. Leech Lake's was implemented in 2005.

When used in conjunction with other management tools, slot limits have proven effective in increasing anglers' catch rates and increasing the number of larger walleyes in a population.

"It gave us a more quality fishery and initially it preserved more spawning fish," said Barry Woods, a guide on Rainy Lake, about that lake's slot limit.

It's almost hard to remember that in the mid-1990s, when the slot was established on Rainy, catch-and-release fishing for walleyes was still a new concept. Now anglers are accustomed to measuring the fish they catch and throwing some back. Resorts have adapted to the change and now draw fishing clients who are less concerned about taking home a pile of frozen filets.

"There's been an evolution," said Tim Goeman, Department of Natural Resources regional fisheries supervisor at Grand Rapids. "It's almost a prestigious thing to have a walleye slot limit on your lake."

Al Maas has been guiding anglers, mostly on Leech Lake, for 41 years now.

"We have an 18- to 26-inch slot, and you're allowed one over 26," Maas said. "With a four-fish limit. People are perfectly happy with that."

The regular statewide walleye limit is six fish, but four-fish limits are in place along with the slots on Leech, Rainy and Mille Lacs.

"If we look back, over the years I've guided, it used to be that if you didn't limit out, you had a bad day," Maas said. "Those days are gone."

Anglers still hope to catch enough walleyes for a shore lunch or a meal, but almost nobody is taking pictures of big stringers of fish anymore.

Still, one segment of anglers remains bitter about slot limits, Sundin said.

"Most of the guys who were opposed to them are still opposed to them, even though they can be shown evidence that it has been

better for their lakes than they think," he said.

But young anglers, especially, embrace slots, Sundin said.

"It doesn't represent anything that has been taken away from them," he said.

The slot limit on Lake Winnibigoshish came up for review last fall. Although DNR officials offered to relax the Winnie slot to 18 to 26 inches from the current 17 to 26 inches, public testimony favored leaving the slot at 17 to 26 inches.

"I never dreamed people would want that," Goeman said, "but for the last 10-year period, fishing has been better than ever on Winnie, and people can catch fish to eat."

Creel surveys show anglers are still keeping as many walleyes per hour as they did before the slot limit, said Chris Kavanaugh, DNR area fisheries supervisor at Grand Rapids. But they're catching a lot more walleyes.

Sundin agrees. "We're keeping the same number of fish we used to keep, but the

catch rate has improved," he said. "It isn't that we're keeping smaller fish. It's that we're not keeping that odd big one."

Why not more? Kavanaugh said he gets a good number of calls from people who would like to see slot limits placed on their lakes. But the regulation isn't right for every lake, DNR officials say.

It isn't right on lakes where stocking is used to support the walleye population, such as Pokegama Lake near Grand Rapids.

"The best return to the angler is when those fish reach a catchable and keepable size, and people are keeping them," Goeman said.

When slot limits are established, they are made as experimental regulations and reviewed after 10 years. Sometimes, the regulations need tweaking.

Rainy Lake's slot was expanded after several years to protect more fish because biologists had thought too many fish were leaving the system.

Your Start-To-Finish Tile Center

- Kitchens & Baths
- Floors & Walls
- Entries & Patios
- Countertops & Backsplash
- Interior & Exterior Decorative Tiles

Stop in and see the new styles & colors from:

Yankton Paint & Decorating

406 Broadway, Yankton, 665-5032 • www.yanktonpaintanddecorating.com

Does Your Flat Roof Leak?

Seal your flat roof with Spray Foam.

Save money and spray over your existing roof!

Spray Foam Benefits:

- Adds insulation R-7 per inch
- Lightweight
- Seamless & Self Flashing
- Warranty Included

**allspray
FOAM**

ROOFING, INSULATING AND METAL ROOF AND GRAIN BIN RESTORATION

Call for a FREE Estimate.
Rusty Parmely, 605-354-1143

Give Your AC the OK for Summer

We offer service and repair on all makes and models of air conditioning systems to keep your home comfortable this summer.

Call 665-3970 for your KPH A/C Checkup

KPH American Standard
HEATING & AIR CONDITIONING

Heating & Air Conditioning

1901 Broadway • Yankton, SD 57078 • (605) 665-3970

Experienced Direct Sales Manager

Due to the passage of healthcare reform and the resulting increasing demand for our products, Aflac is putting together a direct sales team for eastern South Dakota. We are looking for an experienced direct sales manager and people with experience marketing feed/seed, insurance, or other direct sales products to bring our products to the individual market. Interested candidates should submit their resume with detailed work history to donna.grandcentral@midconetwork.com.