



Illinois has been a leading state in many NWTF habitat projects designed to maintain and grow wild turkey populations. In Illinois, much of the project work is being done on private lands.

Photo by Tom Carpenter

Hunters benefit from projects, partnerships

By John Burk
Contributing Writer

The Illinois spring turkey season is roughly six weeks away, so it seems like a good time to address the ongoing effort to keep the state's populations strong – or at least keep it from declining as it has in other

parts of the country.

Turkey hunters and enthusiasts, regardless of where they reside, have become painfully aware of the turkey decline that has been challenging resource managers over the last two decades.

Although the rate of decline varies regionally, the rate of decline of eastern wild turkeys in the U.S. over this time span, according to University of Georgia wild turkey researcher Michael Chamberlain, is 18 percent.

BEHIND THE NUMBERS: ILLINOIS TURKEYS 50 YEARS OF NWTF HABITAT WORK

The root of the decline, based upon recent telemetry research, is that poult survival today is significantly lower than it had been 20 years ago when most turkey populations were experiencing explosive growth and harvest records were being broken annually.

Although the reasons for this significant drop in poult survival are numerous, managers agree that the most effective remedy for poor poult survival is to improve the quality and quantity of nesting and early brood rearing cover.

Taken a step further, Dr. Chamberlain stated that telemetry data suggests that the proximity of nesting habitat to quality early brood range is also critical to poult survival. If the two habitat types are separated by 800 yards or more, the brood will not survive their journey.

Making sure that quality nesting habitat is in close proximity to quality early brood rearing habitat is a foundational goal of the newly launched National Wild Turkey Federation Habitat Four The Hatch (H4TH) Initiative that 17 states, including Illinois, are a part of.

The 10-year initiative strives to create and maintain 1 million acres of these "turkey critical" habitats throughout the region. Only a small portion of extreme southern Illinois lies in the H4TH landscape but promoting and funding the type of work that creates and maintains quality nesting and brood rearing habitat has always been an NWTF priority in Illinois.

The NWTF is, and has been, considered a national leader in the nongovernmental conservation organization arena, especially as it relates to our work with upland habitats, and, more specifically, forested habitats, that wild turkeys rely upon.

Since our inception 50 years ago, our chapter system in Illinois has been at the head of the pack in fund raising and putting dollars raised to work on the ground.

In 2023, NWTF celebrated its 50th year anniversary by setting and achieving the following aggressive goals:

- Positively impact 1,000,000 acres (1,009,053 accomplished).
- Raise \$500,000 for wild turkey research (\$582,374 allocated to turkey research and represented the largest single year commitment in the history of NWTF).
- Dedicate \$1 million for Hunting Heritage Programs (\$1,014,432 achieved).
- Raise \$5 million to build a \$50 million endowment to secure the long-term fiscal health of the NWTF (\$8,555,209 achieved).

Partnerships are key

One key to the NWTF's



success is its ability to effectively partner with other organizations and agencies.

When we collaborate with other like-minded conservationists our dollars go further and our impact happens at more of a landscape scale where a difference can really be made.

As more than 90% of the land in my district (Illinois, Iowa and Missouri) is privately owned, working on private land is critical to our relevancy in this region.

Putting NWTF dollars to work equitably on private land has always been a challenge. One way that this has been accomplished is by assisting, usually Soil and Water Conservation Districts, with the purchase of equipment such as burn trailers and native warm season grass drills. This equipment is then made available to private landowners in that county, and often, surrounding counties.

Here again, Illinois was one of the leading states in these types of projects. This equipment was in large part helped accomplish a large percentage of the more than 4 million acres impacted between 2012 and 2022 under the "Save the Habitat. Save the Hunt." initiative.

Another way NWTF impacts private land is through our partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In many cases, especially as it relates to forest management, NRCS has lacked the capacity to provide technical service to private landowners interested in forest management.

Here again, Illinois was ahead of the curve and helped set the mold in developing an agreement with the NRCS to support two forester positions for three years. Proper forest management often results in critically important quality nesting and early brood rearing habitat for turkeys. This is especially true in agricultural landscapes where land use of most open land is not compatible with providing these key habitats and cannot be modified because the current use is too valuable to sacrifice.

Proper Forest Management

As part of their duties, NWTF foresters meet with private landowners in their respective service areas (central and south-



Turkey nesting and poult production continue to be the focus of habitat work.

Photos courtesy of DNR

ern Illinois) to develop management plans for their properties and assist them in applying for cost share funding to help with implementation.

The original agreement was so effective 12 years ago that NRCS has renewed the agreement annually and has expanded funding to include another forester position to cover northern Illinois.

Stacy Lindemann is the forester in central Illinois and Chase Seals covers the southern portion. Combined, during our 2023 anniversary year, they made 212 landowner contacts, conducted 287 landowner site visits, produced 51 tree planting plans impacting 1,148 acres, wrote 8 burn plans impacting 222 acres, wrote 41 forest management plans and 55 plan updates on existing plans totaling 8,652 acres, conducted 111 NRCS practice reviews, and assisted with seven landowner field days.

National Forestry Initiative

The success of the Illinois agreement also helped lay the foundation for a National Forestry Initiative, now in its second five-year agreement. The first \$5 million agreement between the NWTF and the NRCS was launched in 2018 and was responsible for putting 24 professional foresters to work across the nation.

The current five-year agreement, valued at more than \$7 million was initiated in September 2023 and extended the existing staff by another six positions.

John Burk is the Senior Regional Biologist at The National Wild Turkey Federation. This article originally appeared in the *Outdoor Illinois Wildlife Journal*.