

On the trail of wild turkeys



IN THE FIELD

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The skies were still dark as a team of turkey hunters pulled into Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton on a recent fall morning.

Federal facilities generally frown on live ammunition, and Long Island's wild turkey season — only the second in living memory — wouldn't start for another two months.

Never mind. These biologists were after live prey, their trucks loaded with all manner of equipment needed to trap and band wild turkeys. That included: a bag of bait corn to lure the birds, leg bands, a 30-by-40-foot net and an air cannon to shoot the net up and over the turkeys.

"Once we get the birds in, we'll pull the trigger, shooting the net out about 60 feet, 70 feet," said Chip Hamilton, a bird conservation biologist with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

Banding helps scientists track how far individual birds roam from their home territory. Once the turkeys are trapped, biologists record each bird's age, sex and overall condition, then fit one leg with a numbered band. Hunters who shoot a banded turkey are encouraged to report the bird's location by calling a toll-free phone number on the leg band.

The practice also gives the state a better idea of the local wild turkey population, now estimated at about 3,000.

Hunted out of New York State by the mid-19th century, wild turkeys were successfully reintroduced in recent decades. They returned to Long Island in the 1990s, when upstate birds were transferred to parks in Brookhaven and East Hampton, and now thrive from the East End to the William Floyd Parkway in eastern Brookhaven.

"I see them at the end of my block all the time in Ridge," Hamilton said.

Last year the DEC held the region's first official fall hunt, a



Jessica Romaine and Jessica Maxfield, both with the state Department of Environmental Conservation, band a wild turkey at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton recently. The state is trying to tally the turkey population and track the birds' movements.

five-day season that netted a few dozen birds. Researchers trapped a handful of birds that fall but hoped to band more this year. In the weeks leading up to banding season, the biologists laid out bait corn at spots frequented by wild turkeys and watched to see what time they usually showed up.

The set-up

On that particular day at Brookhaven National Laboratory, the DEC team hoped to nab members of a group of 12 to 15 toms and hens that regularly fed on an athletic field on the property's eastern side. They banded three birds there the previous week.

Mist was rising over the field when Hamilton and his team pulled up to rendezvous with Doug Little, a biologist with the National Wild Turkey Federa-

tion. They parked the trucks by a softball diamond, close to a camouflage tent where Little would camp out, one hand on a remote detonator to launch the net and trap the birds.

Hamilton, Little and DEC biologist Mike Clark hoisted the air cannon and a portable air compressor out of their trucks. They partially unspooled the net so it lay parallel to a trail of cracked corn. Weights were attached to the net, then inserted into the prongs of the cannon.

After pumping compressed air to load the cannon, the team set flattened boxes against the sides of the cannon and piled branches on top for cover. Then everyone retreated to their trucks, leaving Little in the tent with the detonator.

Around 9 a.m. a group of turkeys was spotted nearby. The biologists, still inside their

trucks, craned their necks to the northwest.

"I just saw one turkey, a tom with two hens," Clark said quietly. "There's more coming now."

Soon 15 birds made their way methodically across the pine needles and onto the field. One eventually went for the corn bait, and the rest followed with alacrity. Then they paused, eyeing the net warily.

No easy task

"I think the net's got them nervous," Clark said.

That's where things got dicey. Turkeys startle easily. To avoid hurting or decapitating the birds, biologists don't like to launch the net unless most birds' heads are firmly down in the corn.

Alas, these turkeys soon backed away and wandered off

to the other edge of the field. Hamilton, Green and Clark conferred with Little via two-way radio on whether they should "motivate" the birds back toward the net by walking toward them.

They decided against it, lest the turkeys spook and abandon the field entirely. But by 11 a.m. the birds had moved on anyway, leaving the team with an empty net.

Another try that afternoon by the lab's meteorological field was even less fruitful. No turkeys, just a deer or two that peered anxiously at the cannon, then nibbled the corn. "The jewelry store was open, but no customers," Little said.

Still cheerful, they made plans to meet again there the following week. Patience — a useful trait for both hunters and scientists.