

Spring Burns Help Wildlife Habitat and Wild Turkeys

During the past few weeks, USDA Forest Service fire managers, state wildlife biologists and private landowners have lit their oil-filled drip torches and commenced prescribed burning practices in the forests and fields of the Southeast.

They'll keep starting controlled burns as long as weather conditions allow. Prescribed burns are safe and manageable fires that burn pine needles and dead branches on the ground, which can build to dangerous levels and lead to catastrophic wildfires.



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However, with spring turkey hunting and wild turkey nesting season just around the corner, many folks wonder why land managers burn the woods where wild turkey nests may be destroyed.

"Prescribed fire is a wonderful tool and mimics a natural process," said Dr. James Earl Kennamer, the National Wild Turkey Federation's senior vice president for conservation programs. "Introducing fire kills unwanted brush so natural grasses and plants that benefit wildlife can grow. Without prescribed fire, unwanted plants and trees will overtake the forest floor and hazardous fuels will build up causing the forest floor to become susceptible to devastating wildfires."

Prescribed burning is most effective during late March and early April when shrubs and saplings start to bloom. These months are also prime for spring turkey hunting and when turkeys are starting to nest. A common misperception is that prescribed burns are detrimental to wild turkey populations because they burn lots of wild turkey nests. However, wildlife biologists know the years of improved nesting and brood habitat provided by prescribed burning is far more important to the turkey population than the loss of a few nests.

"Research in northcentral Louisiana shows that most hens nest somewhere less brushy than areas selected for burning," said Brian Zielinski, NWTF regional biologist. "Hens prefer to nest in thick grassy areas with little brush where they can blend in and feel safe."

While it is true that some nests are lost during prescribed burns, the benefits of improved habitat outweigh the few burned nests. In fact, even if a nest is lost, hens will likely renest.

"Up to two-thirds of hens that lose their nests will renest," said Zielinski. "There's no real reason to believe that prescribed burning will hurt wild turkey populations. Reality is that prescribed burns improve wild turkey habitat and that helps populations."

A Plan to Help

"Our volunteers really believe in keeping the forests healthy," said Kennamer. "They know that in order for their kids and grandchildren to enjoy what we have now, they have to help get work done on the ground."

Since 2002, NWTF state and local chapters have spent more than \$228,000 in 23 states to help fund prescribed fire projects. Through the NWTF's Hunting Heritage Super Fund, volunteers donate money to further the work that government agencies do on the ground.

"As nonprofit conservation groups continue to work with state and federal wildlife and land management agencies, the trend of devastating wildfires will decline. However, our forests must be actively managed or catastrophic wildfires will continue to unnecessarily burn homes, property and forests."

For more information about prescribed burning, contact Dennis Daniel, the U.S. Forest Service's national liaison to the NWTF at (800) THE-NWTF. For information about the NWTF, call (800) THE-NWTF.