

Welcoming Wildlife: Wild Turkeys

A simple feeder supports native birds.

BY JOSHUA CONWAY



Wild turkey feeder at The Bear Trace at Harrison Bay.

From holiday entrée to contender for the national bird, the wild turkey is an iconic part of the American landscape. Widespread throughout eastern and the central United States and Canada, the wild turkey once ranged from southern Maine, west through southern Ontario to central South Dakota, south to eastern Arizona, and east to Florida. However, with the arrival of European settlers and the ever-changing landscape, wild turkey populations soon

declined to the point of near extirpation by 1935. The combination of habitat loss from agriculture, the destruction of mature nut-producing trees, excessive hunting, over-grazing by livestock, nest flooding, unfavorable climatic changes, and predation has led to the rapid decline of a bird population that was once more than ten million.

Fortunately, the wild turkey is also known as one of the greatest wildlife restoration success stories. Vigorous restoration programs and regulated

hunting seasons in 49 states have allowed turkeys to once again inhabit most of its ancestral range. In fact, some population studies indicate a natural range expansion resulting from the protection afforded to this highly valued public game resource. The concept that a wildlife species is a public trust resource is what allows all wildlife restoration to be successful.

What follows is the success story of how the staff at one golf course decided to try to invite more turkeys to

their property and ended up doubling the initial population.

The Bear Trace at Harrison Bay is an 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course located near Chattanooga, Tenn. The golf course is operated by Tennessee's Department of Environment and Conservation, and, as you might expect, environmental stewardship is very important there. The Bear Trace at Harrison Bay became an Audubon International Certified Cooperative Sanctuary in 2008 and has since been exploring new ways to improve and enhance the environment.

turkeys continued to visit and move through the golf course, while growing more comfortable with the surroundings and distant human observers.

Quickly realizing that they needed to provide a more suitable way of providing supplemental food for the turkeys, staff started looking at mechanical feeders to place out on the golf course. However, due to funding limitations, purchasing a mechanical feeder would not be possible, so they began to explore other options. Many feeder designs were discussed, but a simple trough-style design that would be

bottom of the pipe to allow moisture to be removed so the feed would not be damaged. A five- to six-foot section of solid pipe was then inserted into the other side of the ninety degree elbow and a cap placed on the end of the pipe. This section of pipe was placed against a tree directed upward and served as the holding tube for the feed, which would fall into the trough as the feed was removed by the turkeys. The feeder was attached to a tree on the 17th hole, where the turkeys could be seen each day, using metal plumber's tape.

It took only a few days for the turkeys and other animals to find the feeder. It soon became apparent that the 24-inch length of the trough was too long and that it could not support the weight of the feed and the force of the feeding action. A deer was seen stepping on the trough, which was about 12 inches off the ground, knocking the trough section off and releasing all the feed in the storage tube at one time. To remedy this problem, the staff shortened the trough section to 12 inches, and there have not been any issues since.

Building on the success of the first feeder, the Bear Trace staff decided to tweak their feeder. Using the same design, the staff decided to use a four-inch PVC irrigation pipe painted black, resulting in a much more durable feeder that has shown no damage since being placed on the golf course. Also, using the same design, the staff produced another feeder using gray electrical conduit, which was even better, as it was dark in color without having to be spray painted.

The staff at The Bear Trace at Harrison Bay has had great success providing food by utilizing surplus supplies. In fact, they report many poults have been fledged in 2010, and they estimate the population of wild turkeys has more than doubled.

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Late in 2009 a flock of 19 turkeys was spotted at The Bear Trace at Harrison Bay. The presence of the turkeys was a welcome sight, considering that more than one at a time had not been seen in the past. In an effort to encourage the turkeys to stay at the golf course, and under the advice of a local fellow golf course superintendent who has extensive experience with wild turkeys, The Bear Trace staff purchased cracked corn and placed it on the ground near the corridors that the turkeys had been moving through. As the days passed, more and more

refilled by gravity as the cracked corn was removed was soon settled on. Previously purchased double-walled ADS four-inch solid drain tile was selected to construct the feeder because it was sturdy and the black color would not be noticeable. The trough section was made by cutting off a 24-inch section of pipe. This pipe was capped on one end with a standard ADS four-inch cap, and the other end was inserted into a standard four-inch 90-degree elbow. The top half of the pipe was cut out to form the feeder trough. Small holes were drilled in the