It is the season for turkeys and they are not all in the freezer section. You may have noticed them in pastures as you drive in some of the less developed parts of the county. We recently had a dozen fly across Shingle Creek as we were boating. You may see them near Boggy Creek Road as you go to the airport. They are often seen along Canoe Creek Road and Pleasant Hill Road in some of the remaining ranch lands.

Osceola County is home to two types or subspecies of wild turkeys. The eastern wild turkey (Meleagris gallopavo silvestris) and the Florida wild turkey (Meleagris gallopavo Osceola). The Florida wild turkey is often called the Osceola turkey. It lives throughout the peninsular part of the state and hunters often pay big bucks to harvest one of our natives since they are found no where else in the world.

It takes a little training to distinguish the two birds as they look very similar. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) clarifies that the Florida wild turkey has darker wing feathers and the white bars on the primary wing feathers are narrower than the black bars and are irregular or broken.

Though endangered species such as the manatee and the Miami blue butterfly have had serious population declines, the wild turkey in one native species that has seen a tremendous increase in populations thanks to human input.

When North America was first discovered, there were large numbers of turkeys across the South. As settlement expanded, land was cleared and their habitat was altered. The practice of market hunting, or harvesting birds for sale, expanded and numbers of turkeys declined to near extinction.

Today, turkeys populations are higher than in previous history because of restocking and land management efforts of state wildlife agencies such as our FWC, private land owners and the strong support of members of the National Wild Turkey Federation. This is a case where we have been very successful in helping a wild species recover from a doom and gloom scenario.

Habitat loss has a major impact on animal populations and fortunately, land can be managed for a variety of uses and benefit wild turkeys. They don’t have habitat boundaries or territories and wander wherever their needs for food, water and cover can be met. Winter flocks of 20 or more birds may stay in a 50 acre home range, but break up into smaller flocks during breeding season and cover a range of several miles. The smaller breeding groups break in March and the range of a wild turkey gobbler may then span an area of about 350 acres. Good quality habitat will support one bird per 30 acres or one flock for about 640 to 800 acres. If you consistently see them in an area, it is good wild turkey habitat.

Habitat needs vary with the season as wild turkeys have different needs during their lifecycle. During the nesting season, March through May, marginal areas along woodlands, old fields and unmowed pastures and brush are important. If you live near a natural area where turkeys live, perhaps you can delay mowing until after nesting season. If you must mow, scout for nests with just the tractor (not actual mowing) or by walking and be especially watchful in the zone that is 50 to 60 yards from the woodland. Once nests are spotted, avoid mowing the area that provides cover for nesting.

Mature timber for roosting is also important. Turkeys don’t always roost in the same area so scattered clumps of tall trees are important. Trees provide an escape from predators that can attack them on the
Nesting time is difficult for turkeys. It takes 12 to 13 days to lay a nest full of eggs, 10 for the average clutch (group). Hens are on the nest 25 to 28 days while they incubate the eggs. At this time they are vulnerable to predators such as raccoons, skunks, foxes, opossums and dogs and only 45 to 50 percent of the nests hatch. The young turkeys that do hatch, poults, roost on the ground for about 2 weeks and are still very vulnerable. Only about 30 percent of the poults survive.

It is very difficult to control predators but it is possible to provide good habitat for the young birds which includes grasses and open cover of 1 to 3 foot vegetation so they can get seeds, tender shoots and insects. Turkeys need water daily and must have easy access to a pond or wetland.

As our population increases, it is possible to develop large tracts of land and maintain patches of mature woodlands and adjacent grass and shrubs that provide habitat for wild turkey populations. Unfortunately, as land is continually subdivided into smaller tracts, managing for wild turkeys and other animals is more difficult. Greenways, natural area corridors adjacent to development, can create a web of connections critical to providing adequate wildlife habitat in subdivided landscapes.

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