

# Gobble, Gobble:

## Turkey Hunting in S.D.

By Brenda Kleinjan

**T**HE BIRD MOST OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH THANKSGIVING is the focus of many hunters' attention each April when the spring turkey season opens in South Dakota.

Among those who follow the turkey's gobble is Clinton Berndt of rural White, S.D. Each spring and fall, the Sioux Valley Energy member and others from the eastern South Dakota farming community trek 320 miles one way to hunt turkeys in Mellette County south of Murdo.

"I've been out five times since Christmas, I usually take a party of six – about 25 different people have gone through the years," Berndt said in early February. The fall season closed Jan. 31.

"They've got plenty of turkeys they like getting rid of," Berndt said.

Of the four or five ranches Berndt hunts on, he figures each ranch has about 200 to 400 birds.

According to South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks statistics for 2007, there were 550 turkey licenses available in Mellette County for the 2007

spring season; only 415 were sold. The overall number of birds estimated in the state that year topped 72,000.

Berndt and his cohorts are among a growing number of hunters in the state seeking toms and hens. From 2000 to 2007, the number of resident licenses issued for turkey hunting in the state nearly doubled from 12,280 to 23,198.

South Dakota offers spring and fall turkey seasons open to both residents and nonresidents. License options include a Black Hills license or a Prairie-turkey license. For harvest needs, some prairie units may offer two-tag options.

South Dakota's prairie turkey firearms licenses are limited in number and distributed by lottery drawings.

For the upcoming spring firearms season, nearly two-thirds of the counties in South Dakota will have a turkey season. While some counties will only have a couple dozen licenses available, others, like Mellette, will have more than 500 licenses.



Photo by South Dakota Tourism

# Turkey Hunter Safety

**South Dakota's robust population** has proven to be popular with hunters. Consequently, when they take to the field, turkey hunters should use caution in order to have a safe hunting experience.

"Hunters shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that they're in the woods alone," said Curt Robertson, hunter safety coordinator for the S.D. Game, Fish and Parks Department. "A hunter who makes that assumption is more likely to be involved in an accident."

Robertson noted that through the years, there has been progress on making turkey hunting a safer sport.

"The hunter who is aware of his surroundings and constantly watchful is the one who's going to stay safe," Robertson said.

## Some safety rules for hunting wild turkeys include:

- The colors of the gobbler turkey include red, black, white and blue. Eliminate those colors from your hunting outfit.
- The safest calling spot is in open timber rather than thick brush. The key to success and safety is eliminating movement, not complete concealment.
- Select a tree trunk, rock or stump that is wider than your shoulders and higher than your head to place your back against when calling a turkey.
- Be alert when other birds, crows or your turkey fall silent. That may be the sign of another hunter in the area.

• Don't alert another hunter to your presence by moving, waving your arms or making turkey sounds. While remaining in place, speak in a loud, clear voice to announce your presence.

- Don't stalk your quarry. More than half of all turkey hunting accidents happen when one hunter mistakenly stalks another.
- Always assume that any call you hear is another hunter.
- Don't shoot until you can clearly see the entire turkey and determine its sex.
- Always wear hunter orange when going into the woods, leaving the woods or walking in the woods.
- While sitting and waiting for a turkey, put hunter orange on a nearby tree.
- Wrap hunter orange around any turkey you take or while moving your decoys.

"The most important key to safety is making sure your target is a turkey before firing," Robertson said. "A dark object that suddenly appears behind some bushes or moves along a ridge may be your hunting partner."

A copy of the rules governing spring turkey hunting is included in the license package that each licensee receives. Hunters who need another copy can get one at the GFP Web site, [www.sdgfp.info](http://www.sdgfp.info). On the home page, highlight "Wildlife, Hunting, Fishing" and click on the link to "Hunting." Then click on the link to "Turkey" and then click on "Spring Turkey Regulations." Copies of the regulations may also be obtained through the mail by phoning the GFP Information Office at 605-773-3485.



Because of the availability of licenses, Berndt was able to obtain licenses and tags to harvest 10 birds during the fall season.

"They're a smart bird, a lot of fun to hunt," said Berndt who has sought the birds for the better part of 20 years. "They scare the living daylight out of you when they're taking off, though."

The birds are classified as big game in South Dakota.

In South Dakota, the 2009 spring turkey season runs from April 11 to May 17. The 2008 fall season, which began Oct. 1, 2008, concluded in Jan. 31, 2009.

The average hunter spent 2.73 days hunting spring prairie turkeys, while those seeking birds in the Black Hills spent 3.45 days hunting the birds. Nearly 2,500 people sought birds during the spring archery season in 2007 and spent an average 4.25 days hunting.

Berndt said his group typically leaves home on a Friday morning, hunts that afternoon and the following day and return home late Saturday night.

In addition to the love of the hunt, Berndt said the landowners and relationships built over the years adds to the enjoyment of the hunt.

"We've gotten to know some of the ranchers down there – you can't ask for any better people. We'd just assume sit and visit than hunt, but you've went to hunt, so you've got to hunt," Berndt said with a chuckle.

For more about wild turkeys in South Dakota, check out "The Wild Turkey in South Dakota" book available through the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department. The book discusses the rise of wild turkeys in the state and the efforts to restore populations of wild turkeys into and beyond their historical distribution in the state. "The Wild Turkey in South Dakota" not only documents this fascinating history, it also is an important source of information on the description, behavior, ecology and management of wild turkeys in South Dakota. Its appeal extends from a broad audience that enjoys watching, hearing or hunting wild turkeys to turkey enthusiasts that want to learn about the many interesting details of wild turkey ecology and management. Assuredly, all will enjoy the numerous photos in this full-color, 188-page soft cover book.

## SOUTH DAKOTA TURKEY HUNTING

Spring Archery, Spring and Fall Firearms Prairie Seasons  
Spring and Fall Black Hills Firearms Seasons

Year	Resident	Non-Resident	Birds Harvested		
	Licenses	Licenses	Tags	Toms	Hens
2000	12,280	744	12,111	6,892	1,323
2001	12,581	819	12,592	9,675	1,659
2002	14,005	928	12,548	7,002	1,393
2003	14,430	989	12,828	6,912	1,808
2004	16,072	1,185	13,021	8,493	1,775
2005	18,379	1,359	14,060	9,354	2,080
2006	22,172	1,623	16,554	10,216	2,891
2007	23,198	1,646	18,757	11,149	3,442
<b>Total</b>	<b>133,117</b>	<b>9,293</b>	<b>112,471</b>	<b>69,693</b>	<b>16,371</b>
Average	16,640	1,162	14,059	8,712	2,046
<b>Total Licenses Issued:</b>	<b>142,410</b>	<b>Total Birds Harvested:</b>	<b>86,064</b>		

Source: South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks "2007 Big Game Summary"