

An NWTF Northeastern Conservation Initiative

PHOTO: MELISSA SCHNEEGAS

National Wild Turkey Federation Forests and Flocks Guide for Private Landowners

The Forests and Flocks Initiative

The National Wild Turkey Federation's (NWTF) Forests and Flocks Initiative is a comprehensive, 10-year conservation effort aimed at enhancing wild turkey habitats across 13 northeastern states. Launched in 2024, the initiative focuses on establishing critical habitat for nesting, brood-rearing and winter survival.

Habitat Over the 4 Seasons

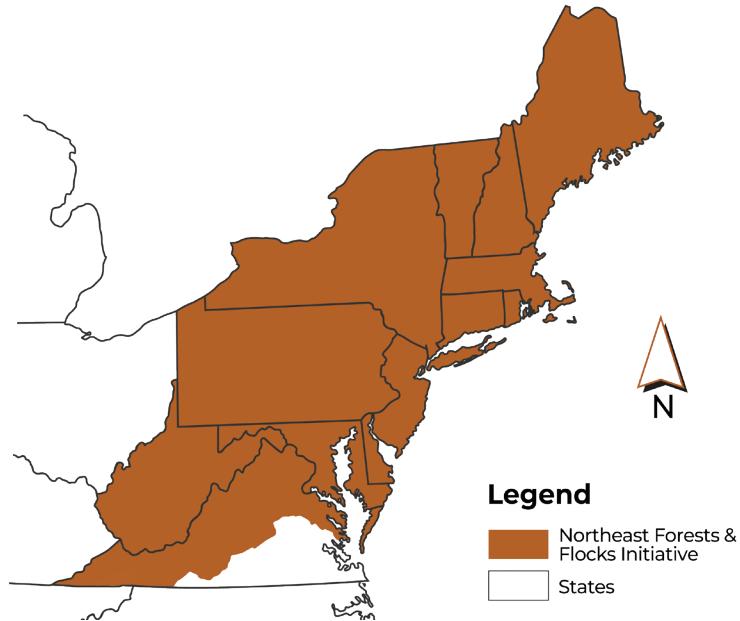
SPRING

Young Forest / Shrubland

Wild turkeys are focused on breeding, nesting and early brood-rearing, making it a vital time for habitat management. Landowners can support these needs by maintaining sparsely vegetated open areas with a mix of grass and forbs for strutting and bugling while also preserving shrublands and young forests for nesting. Hens prefer to nest in areas with low-growing, dense vegetation or coarse woody debris that offers concealment from predators, often near the edge of an opening or within regenerating forest.

Young forest and shrubland can be created by performing timber cuts to set back forest succession or by allowing a field to grow "wild" and develop a heavy woody plant component.

Enhancing native plant diversity, promoting soft edges between habitat types and ensuring a mix of cover and open ground can create ideal conditions for turkeys during this critical part of their life cycle. Finally, avoiding disturbances like mowing or heavy equipment or recreational (ATVs, excessive foot traffic) use during nesting season is crucial.



The Landscape

Forests and Flocks encompasses Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia and northern and western portions of Virginia.

SUMMER

Pollinator / Open Fields

Summer is a perilous time for turkey poult; they thrive in areas with abundant insects adjacent to cover. Practices like rotational mowing, plantings or selective thinning help stimulate plant growth that supports insect populations. Forest openings can be maintained by mowing periodically or planting food plots. Open fields should be managed by mowing outside of the ground nesting bird season.

Pollinator plantings are areas that are planted with native wildflowers and managed to provide pollen for insects as well as food and cover for various wildlife. Pollinator planting can be incorporated into transition zones, such as where a field meets a woodline, acting as a buffer or travel corridor. Maintaining travel corridors between feeding and roosting areas also enhance the habitat's overall suitability for turkey use throughout the summer months.

FALL

Young Forest / Mature Forest

During fall, turkeys focus on building fat reserves by foraging heavily on hard and soft mast like nuts, berries and leftover agricultural crops. Access to diverse food sources is crucial for helping birds maintain energy levels and prepare for the nutritional challenges of winter. Landowners can improve fall habitat by promoting mast-producing trees through crop tree release, maintaining forest openings to young forests and leaving some unharvested crops or field edges intact. A crop tree release is the selective felling or girding of trees that are interfering with desirable trees. A crop tree is selected based on healthy crown characteristics and whether the tree produces food. Increasing food sources for turkeys means selecting nut-producing trees such as oaks, hickory, beech, etc. Quality fall habitat ensures turkeys are well-nourished, socially stable and better equipped to survive the months ahead.

WINTER

Mature Forest / Seeps / Grasslands

Managing land for winter habitat is important for wild turkeys because winter is often the most challenging season for their survival. In cold northeast climates, turkeys face deep snow, limited food availability and harsh weather conditions that can increase energy demands and risk of predation. Turkeys will use different habitats in the winter depending on the current weather conditions; mature forests and open fields are particularly beneficial.

A mixed wood forest contains deciduous and coniferous tree species. Softwood trees are especially important because they retain their needles year-round, providing natural insulation in the winter by blocking wind, trapping heat and preventing snow from accumulating heavily on the ground. This thermal cover creates warmer microclimates and more accessible foraging areas beneath the canopy. It is important to be mindful to retain groups of softwood trees in hardwood dominated systems.

Forest seeps are also an important winter component to manage properly. Seeps are areas where groundwater naturally flows to the surface, keeping the soil warmer and often snow-free. This exposes leaf litter and allows turkeys to forage for insects, seeds and plant material when other food sources are limited or inaccessible. Landowners can manage seeps for the betterment of turkeys by protecting them from heavy equipment use, livestock trampling or logging activity that could compact soil or disrupt water flow. Maintaining a buffer of native vegetation around seeps will minimize erosion and help compete with non-native invasive plant species.

Grasslands can also provide valuable structure in the winter, especially when managed with a mix of native warm-season grasses and forbs. These grasses, such as switchgrass or big bluestem, stand upright through snow and wind, offering vertical cover that can shield turkeys from the elements and predators. In areas with less forest cover or during milder winters, these grasslands can serve as important loafing or foraging sites, especially where residual seed heads and insect life remain accessible.

Proper winter habitat helps reduce energy loss, improves access to critical food sources like leftover mast or seeds, and provides protection from wind and snow. By managing land with these needs in mind, landowners can help maintain healthy turkey populations and support their ability to survive until spring, when breeding and nesting begin again.

How can landowners help us achieve these goals?

Landowners can significantly contribute to the National Wild Turkey Federation's (NWTF) Forests and Flocks Initiative by participating in habitat enhancement projects that align with the initiative's goals. Collaborating with neighbors to manage habitat across property boundaries further amplifies these efforts, leading to more contiguous and effective enhancements. Landowners can gain more information on property specific enhancements by working with local professionals such as state or private foresters, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and county soil and water districts. Additionally, landowners can support the NWTF's mission by engaging in policy advocacy to promote conservation-friendly legislation and by participating in educational programs that bolster hunting heritage.