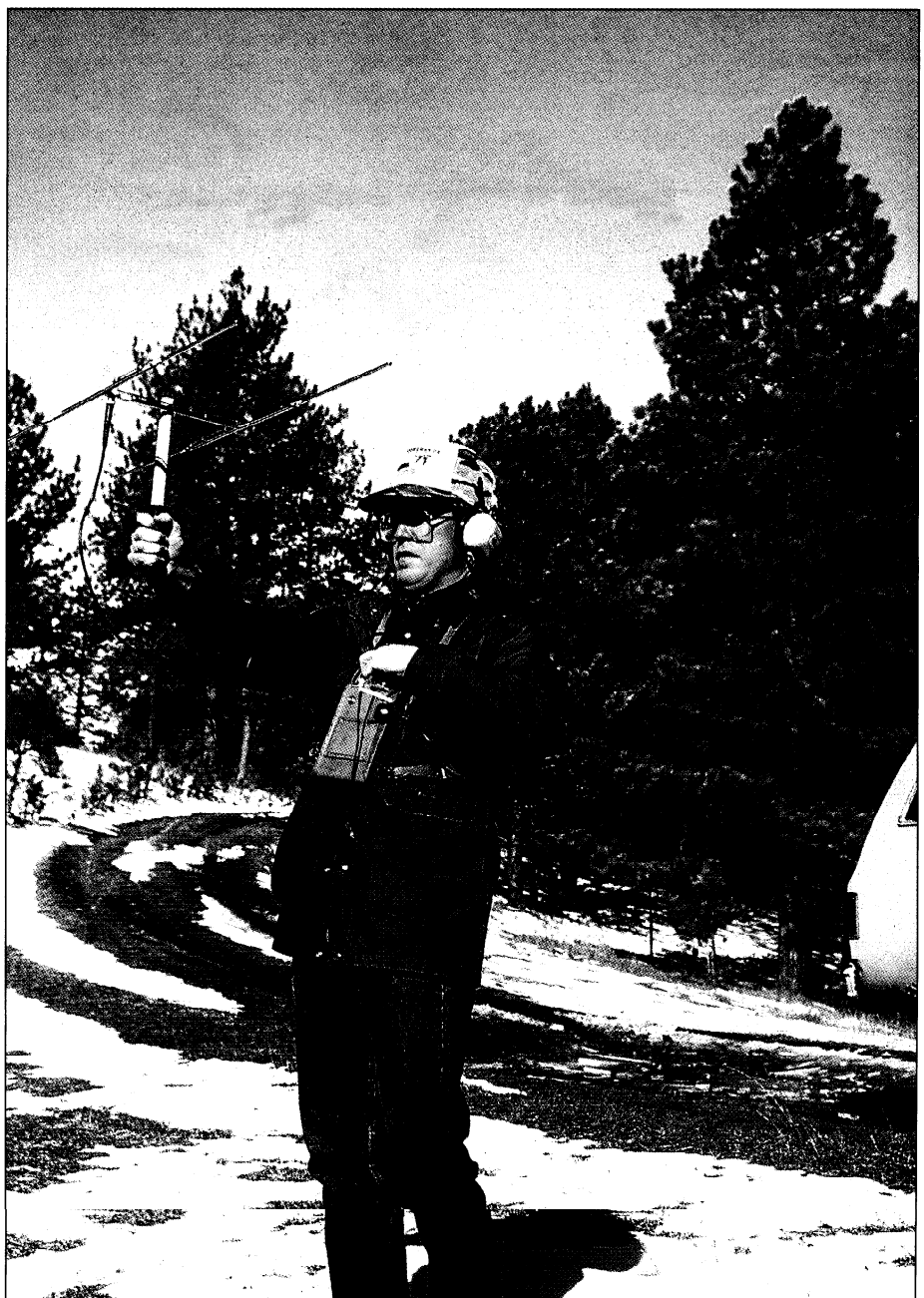
The fate of turkey #88

By Mark Rumble and Todd Mills

On January 9, 1990, 32 turkeys were captured in the Black Hills of South Dakota using the drug alpha-chloralose. One of these turkeys had a unique tag attached to it's wing that indicated it had been trapped previously Let's look back in time and see what made the events in the life of this turkey deviate slightly from "The Events in the Turkey Year" described by Bailey and Rinell in *The Wild Turkey and It's Management.*

It all began in late May or early June of 1987 in western South Dakota, habitat thought by some turkey experts to be unsuitable for Merriam's turkeys. Those "experts" were wrong. A clutch of eggs laid by a hen turkey nearly a month earlier was hatching. In the wild world, success is measured by the number of offspring an individual successfully places in the succeeding generation. This hen was evidently successful at having some of her progeny reach the succeeding generation, because this bird, with a wing tag, was a mature male (at least 1-1/2 years old). But where did this turkey come from?

A year and a half later, at a nearby ranch in Millette County, a large wintering flock of turkeys routinely fed on the waste grain from livestock feeding. Too many wild turkeys wintered around the livestock operation, and they were a nuisance to the operator. These turkeys had no idea what was in store for them on this day, December 28, 1988. A loud explosion and total pandemonium; legged creatures similar to those that fed cattle each morning were handling and tagging these turkeys. One of the males captured was identified with a wing tag, #C4700 and transplanted, along with 39 others, by the South Dakota



Forest Service Wildlife Biologist Mark Rumble uses a direction-finding antenna and receiver to relocate radio-tagged turkeys in the forest.

Department of Game, Fish and Parks.

After a long ride in a trailer and a short stop at the Regional Game, Fish and Parks Office in Rapid City, the doors of the trailer were opened and .... Wow, where were they? The cattle, cottonwood trees, and ranch headquarters were gone-- replaced with a recently logged stand of strange pine trees. These turkeys had been released in the Black Hills, southwest of Rapid City, off Sheridan Lake road.

January 9, 1990, was an important day. This is the day Turkey C4700 gained a new identity: #88. One year and 21 days, and 11 miles as the crow flies, from the place of the initial release in the Black Hills, this mature tom had been "trapped," again. This experience was probably less traumatic than the first. Cracked corn covered with an experimental drug was used to capture these turkeys. The experience would be similar to going under anesthesia. Turkey #88 became a subject in a research study to determine the effects of forest management on Merriam's turkeys. The research branch of the U. S. Forest Service, located in Rapid City, was conducting the study. A radio transmitter was attached like a backpack to Turkey #88. Researchers with a direction-finding antenna could zero in on this radio transmitter, and locate Turkey #88 on subsequent dates.

Wildlife managers gained a substantial amount of information from this second trapping. Turkey #88 weighed almost 17 pounds. Based on the length of his beard (8-1/2 inches) and spurs, we believe he was 2-1/2 years old at the time. Previously, wildlife managers had hypothesized that turkeys transplanted from populations on the prairies of South Dakota could not survive in the Black Hills.

Martin J. Tarby

Mature Merriam's gobbler in strut; an integral part of the spring mating ritual of turkeys and an inspiring display to humans who have witnessed it.,

Biologists believed that turkeys accustomed to feeding on corn spilled around a livestock ranch in prairie woodland habitat, would not be adapted to scratching for and eating pine seeds and kinnikinnick. Turkey #88 and a number of others released at the same time and later recaptured or harvested told wildlife managers to rethink this hypothesis. These turkeys had survived more than a year in the Black Hills!

Over the next 16 months Turkey #88 was observed 31 times. During the winter and spring of 1990 Turkey #88 remained in the vicinity of the capture site. On March 4, 1990, he may have become tired of providing information and moved out of the defined study area. Unless he moved back, he would be excluded from the study to decipher the habitat requirements of Merriam's turkeys. Fortunately, Turkey was relocated on several other occasions, sometimes with up to five other gobblers and eight hens.

Between May and July of 1990 we lost track of him again, but on July 16 we found him seven miles

He was a trophy, all right, but nobody showed him off to friends or family. This Black Hills gobbler was destined to be wasted, probably because the hunter didn't bother to go look for him after the shot.

The remains of Turkey 88, a trophy gobbler, two days after we found him. The crows had already discovered the carcass and nature was taking its course.

to the south with five other toms. During the next five months, Turkey #88 stayed in this general area, but the size of the accompanying flock varied considerably. On August 3, there were 16 gobblers in the flock. On December 28, 1990, exactly two years after his release in the Black Hills, only two other gobblers accompanied Turkey #88. January 25, 1991, found Turkey #88 with four hens and five gobblers and by March 2, there were 23 hens and eight gobblers in the flock. On April 5 and again on April 9, Turkey #88 was seen displaying his glory to eight hens and six toms. While photographs capture much of the beauty of the spring mating ritual display of gobblers, only those who get up at the crack of dawn in spring and spend time in the out-of-doors have been fortunate to observe the spectacle in person.

April 16, 1991, was the last day Turkey #88 provided information to anyone. The radio signal was constant, suggesting that there was no movement. As we approached the site, aided by a radio receiver and antenna, it was apparent that Turkey #88 had provided another piece of information to biologists-a statistic on hunting mortality, part of the data necessary for biologists to project future population status and manage the wildlife resources for all the public.

Data from studies of turkeys, many aided by radio transmitters such as the one placed on #88 have established that regulated spring hunting of gobblers does not harm the population. Because turkeys are polygamous (one male mates with several females), removing some males from the spring population does not impact the future size of the population.

Yet, Turkey #88 did not receive the proper credit for having been harvested during a hunting season. Nobody took photographs of a proud hunter with a trophy bird. Nobody cleaned and had a Thanksgiving turkey with all the trimmings. Turkey #88 was shot, but not retrieved. Evidence at the site (tracks and blood on the snow) suggested that he was probably a long distance from the hunter. A rifle bullet had entered the lower back and exited through the breast. Turkey #88 was not killed instantly; he moved several yards and apparently evaded the hunter, if, indeed, the hunter even searched for him.

Turkey #88 was a trophy that any good spring turkey hunter would have recognized. He had an 11-1/4-inch beard, which at the time tied for 4th place in the records kept by the National Wild Turkey Federation. The spurs on this bird were over an inch long. For those who could appreciate such a trophy, Turkey #88 was a fantasy. For the coyotes, crows, and other scavengers, we hope they appreciated their dinner.

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