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DISTRIBUTION OF THE TURKEY IN FLORIDA — 1973 - 1977¹

LOVETT E. WILLIAMS, JR.

Florida is the type locality for the endemic "Florida Turkey" (*Meleagris gallopavo osceola*). The subspecies intergrades with the "Eastern Turkey" (*M. g. silvestris*) in northern Florida and adjoining states (Aldrich and Duvall 1955). The Turkey occurred in all wooded habitat in Florida in pioneer times. While it was disappearing from most of the eastern United States, it survived throughout Florida probably because of a sparse human population during the early 1900's and the refuge afforded by the state's many large swamps. Perhaps the all time low for Turkeys in Florida was in 1948 when Newman and Griffin (1950) estimated the population to be 26,000.

In 1950 the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission identified several large blocks of vacant Turkey habitat and undertook a large scale restoration program with wild trapped birds (Powell 1965). Restoration methods are discussed by Austin et al. (1972). Restoration was accomplished by 1968 at which time Turkeys were in every Florida county. The population was estimated to be approximately 100,000 in the fall of 1970 (Game and Fresh Water Fish Comm., unpubl. data).

Subsequently, two surveys were conducted to obtain information on present Turkey distribution and to detect changes that may have occurred. In 1973 approximately 120 biologists, game managers, and wildlife officers were contacted for information about Turkey populations in their locales, generally following the method described by Mosby and Handley (1943). Eighty-six responded with useful information, and from this a map was drawn and recirculated to the respondents for further refinements. In 1977, the survey was repeated.

The maps prepared in 1973 and in 1977 were very similar and I consider the small differences to be insignificant and probably due to errors in the method rather than to changes in Turkey distribution. Accordingly, a composite map was drawn to show the approximate distribution of the Turkey in Florida during the period 1973-77 (Fig.1).

I did not attempt to indicate population densities on the map as no accurate method exists to census Turkeys and the margin of error in a density estimate would be so great as to render the figures useless. Furthermore, Turkey numbers in a given population fluctuate greatly from month to month — early summer populations are several fold higher than late winter numbers, even in un hunted populations. Hunted populations sometimes ex-

¹This is a contribution of the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Program, Florida Pittman-Robertson Project W-41.

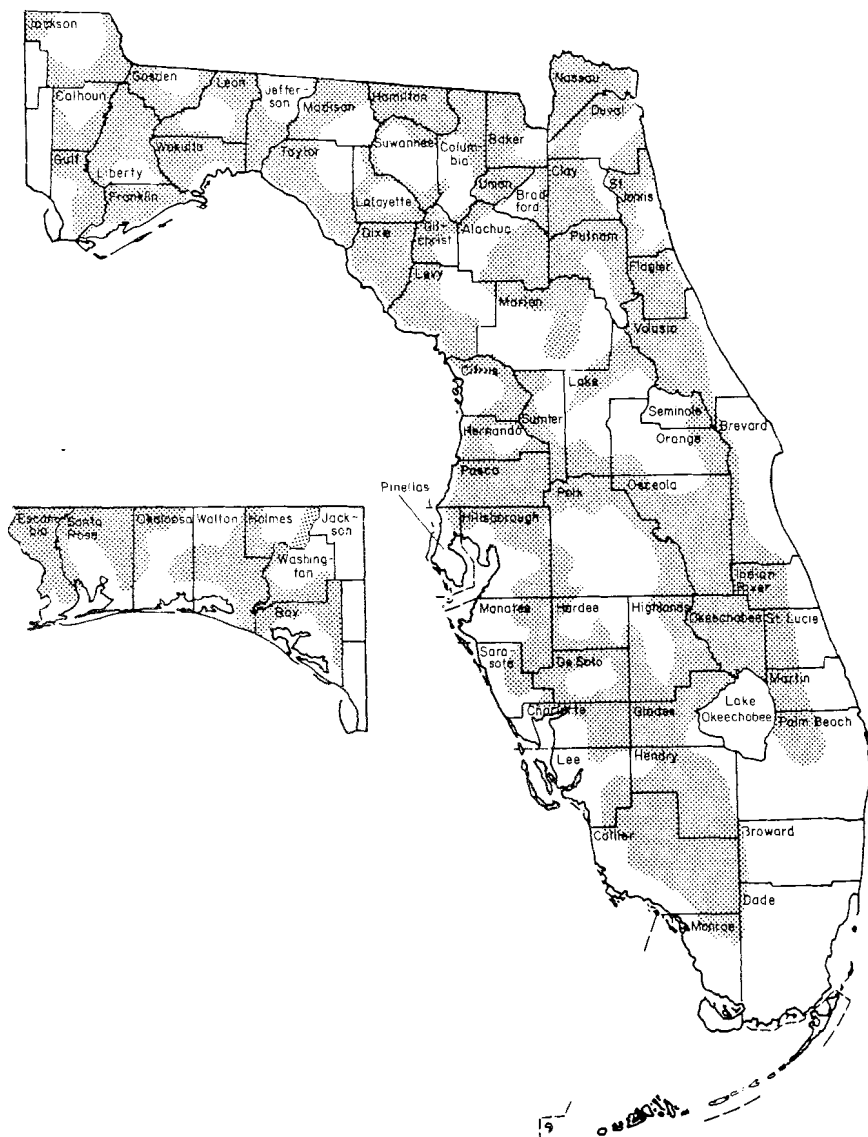


Figure 1. Distribution of the Turkey in Florida, 1973-1977. Resolution of the data is 10 miles (16 km).

perience over 50% mortality from legal hunting during the two-month hunting season. Therefore, I view the continuous occurrence of the species over a period of years as more meaningful from the zoological and management standpoints than the inexplicable ups and downs of the populations that are reflected in any estimate of population numbers at any given time.

In the 1977 survey, 30 of the management oriented respondents were asked to identify any block of unstocked Turkey habitat that was suitable for restocking. Although a few very small blocks of land were mentioned, restocking was not indicated because either they had at least a few Turkeys already or they were too small.

In Florida the range of the Turkey will probably shrink slowly and steadily because of the loss and drastic modification of its habitat by encroachment of civilization during the next few years. I doubt that any other factor will have as significant an effect on the distribution of the species in Florida in the future.

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