

History of the Reintroduction
of the Eastern Wild Turkey
at Mammoth Cave

At one time the Eastern Wild Turkey (Mellagris gallopavo) flourished in the area now known as Mammoth Cave National Park. The settlement of the area in the 1800's and lack of game laws saw the numbers decrease to a minimum around the turn of the century.

The 1929 First Biennial Report of the Kentucky National Park Commission, for the establishment of Mammoth Cave as a National Park, stated "Time was when. . . the turkey and eagle shed their feathers before the crack of the pioneer musket or got trapped along with their furbearing contemporaries. Those days are gone now; but not forever, for these primeaval blessings of nature can be easily be and undoubtedly be restored to this region incident to the development of this great national park." The Management Policies of the National Park Service also encouraged the reintroduction of native plants and animals. In 1932, 1942, 1943, 1947, and 1949 the National Park Service set out to establish a viable turkey population. These efforts were unsuccessful. It was widely suspected that these turkeys, some from Texas, Louisiana, and others reared in game farms were not suitable to the Kentucky habitat, highly susceptible to diseases, and fell prey to the game violator. In 1982 another habitat analysis was conducted by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources and it was found that Mammoth Cave would be a suitable for the establishment of a Wild Turkey Restoration Site. In November of 1982, Mammoth Cave National Park and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources entered into a formal agreement on the establishment of such a site. In January of 1983, 14 wild turkeys, 4 gobblers and 10 hens captured in the wild of Ozark County, Missouri were released at Mammoth Cave. These turkeys, representing the start of the population cost an initial \$500 each to place in the wild. Turkeys from Missouri were released earlier at Land Between the Lakes in western Kentucky and were found to have had outstanding success in reproduction.

Since the release date in 1983, the turkey population has increased at a rapid and successful rate. Park employees, neighbors, and visitors have given the Resource Management Division the details of sightings. These sightings have been recorded, plotted on maps and sent annually to the Wild Turkey Biologist, KDFWR, for submission in his annual reports. In the first year after the release, there were 50 documented sightings and numerous undocumented sightings. According to State Turkey Biologist, George Wright, this was an extraordinarily large hatch, and it left no doubt that the turkey population at Mammoth Cave was well on its way to becoming established. In 1984, there were 27 documented sightings of turkeys evenly distributed throughout the park. 1985 saw 54 documented sightings in and out

of the park. By the end of July, reports were discontinued on turkey sign, because it could be found anywhere, anytime in the park. An estimate of 75 to 100 different poultts were actually seen parkwide. The fall and winter of 1985-1986 produced an exceptionally large mast crop, providing an abundance of food supply. 1986 marked another excellent year for the turkey with 37 sightings and an estimated population of 250 - 300 birds.

In October of 1986, it was determined by the Park and the State that approximately 10-12% of the population would be trapped to enhance the reintroduction efforts of the KFWR in their statewide program. In early January of 1987, The National Park Service and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, in accordance with Memorandum of Understanding # 5530-6-8001 and the Operating Procedures of the project, began trapping operations. Diana Felbeck, a seasonal biologist aid for the State, and Park Ranger Richard Caldwell captured 21 wild turkeys with a cannon box net. These turkeys were relocated in Hart County and nearby Hardin County, as well as other locations throughout the state. 11 hens and 10 gobblers were taken to provide the initial stocking in these areas.

The Wild Turkey Reintroduction Program has been highly successful and beneficial not only to the State, but to the Park and surrounding area as well. This project has provided the State with an excellant stocking population and provided park visitors with the opportunity to observe this seldom encountered species. Good cooperation and enthusiasm of Park neighbors has not only provided important population information, but has also aided in the protection of this bird. Although only a small, isolated number of poaching incidents have occurred, it is still a situation that must be halted to insure the success of the program. The attitudes and concerns of local residents will be of great value in helping to restore the wild turkey population for the sportsman and the nature lover.