

Kentucky spring 2026 turkey harvest sets record

Strong hatch in 2024, good weather set stage for hunter success

BY KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCES

Hunters harvested a record 36,439 turkeys during the 2026 spring hunting season in Kentucky, smashing the 10-year average of 30,847.

Wildlife officials attribute the high harvest to a variety of factors, including more turkeys on the landscape this year, more hunters in the woods and weather conducive for hunting.

"Everything we saw over the last two years – from the high percentages of hens laying eggs and strong poult survival rates to the emergence of cicadas in parts of Western Kentucky – suggested that hunters would enjoy a lot of opportunities to harvest birds this season," said Zak Danks, turkey-grouse program coordinator for the Kentucky Department of

Fish and Wildlife Resources. "When we had four straight weekends of good weather, that just set the stage."

As with past years, a lot of turkeys were taken early in the season.

Youth harvested 2,613 turkeys during the April 4-5 youth-only season alone, 304 higher than the previous record and well above the 10-year average of 1,670. On April 18-19, the opening weekend of the 23-day general season, hunters harvested 13,670 turkeys, well above the 10-year average of 9,860.

"Our youngest hunters set the tone early, and it never let up," Danks said.

But in many ways, the spring season resembled those before it: most turkeys were taken with a shotgun, most were taken by Kentucky residents, and counties to the south and west had the most turkeys harvested, while hunters in the counties to the north and middle of the state took more turkeys per square mile.

OVERALL HARVEST: The spring harvest of 36,439 birds topped the previous record of

36,097 set in 2010 and was 18 percent higher than the 10-year average.

GENDER: Kentucky allows hunters to take bearded hens in the spring, but 99.5 percent of turkeys harvested were male. The 193 bearded hens that were harvested was 157 fewer than the record set in 2011 and well below the 10-year average of 258. Of the 193 birds, 22 were taken during the youth-only season.

TURKEY AGES: 85.8 percent of the male birds harvested were toms, with the rest younger jakes.

METHOD OF TAKE: The vast majority of turkeys were harvested with a shotgun (35,991), with bow (258), crossbow (129) and muzzleloader (61) far behind.

BY REGION: The Green River Region led with 10,132 birds harvested, followed by the Southeast (8,045), the Bluegrass (7,895), the Purchase (5,269) and Northeast (5,098).

TOP COUNTIES: For the third year in a row, Graves County finished with the highest total harvest at 778 birds, followed by Muhlenberg (746), Breckinridge (662), Pulaski (659), Christian

(639), Hopkins (636), Ohio (593), Hardin (566), Grayson (548) and Logan (538). Seven of those counties are in the Green River Region.

But when counties are ranked based on harvest per square mile, six of the top 10 are in the Bluegrass Region, with two in the Northeast Region. Pendleton leads the way at 1.82 birds taken per square mile, followed by Robertson (1.81), Anderson (1.59), Muhlenberg (1.56), Bracken (1.48), Owen (1.41), Graves (1.4), Carroll (1.34), Grant (1.34) and Henry (1.34).

PUBLIC LANDS: 2,373 turkeys were harvested on public land, higher than last year's 1,928 and well above the 10-year average of 1,763.

HUNTER SUCCESS: 25.6 percent of successful hunters harvested two birds.

BANDED BIRDS: Hunters reported harvesting 150 banded turkeys.

Danks said biologists at Kentucky Fish and Wildlife will take a deeper dive into the spring season results as the department continues to strike the balance between providing hunting

opportunities and ensuring a strong, sustainable turkey population.

"The broad conclusions from a first-blush look at the numbers are pretty apparent: a lot of hunters went into the woods, a lot of them had success and there were a lot of 2-year-old birds to be harvested," Danks said. "All in all, those were good things. But we also know that some hunters said they didn't see or hear as many birds as they expected to, particularly in some areas."

Based on harvest rate data, Kentucky hunters are not taking more birds than past research suggested could be unsustainable, Danks said. But researchers continue to collect data and study that issue. They also continue to analyze data related to the entire reproductive cycle, from nest locations to poult survival.

Poult surveys from a year ago suggest the 2027 spring season will also be good, but young turkeys face threats like disappearing habitat, early mowing and predators.

"This was a good year for hunters, but we can't expect a record every year," Danks said.

SUAREZ

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Busch Motorsports.

"Kyle, he was special," Suarez said as he teared up. "I was doing this for Kyle, for (his wife) Samatha, for (his children) Brexton and Lennix and for all of his family."

A non-factor for most of the race, Suarez gambled and took two tires during a late pit stop, then held off Christopher Bell and Denny Hamlin on restarts before the race was called when the sky opened up and rain drenched the track shortly before midnight Eastern time.

NASCAR quickly made the decision to call the race with 27 laps remaining.

Bell finished second; Hamlin was third.

The two Joe Gibbs Racing teammates had a chance to catch Suarez on the two restarts, but couldn't clear his No. 7 Chevrolet.

"It's a bummer," Bell said, who won the rain-shortened 2024 Coca-Cola 600. "It wasn't meant to be today. That's 2026 for us."

Hamlin said he was "just a little unlucky."

"The 20 car (Bell) and us were just really battling because we knew whoever could clear him (would win the race)," Hamlin said. "We were really good all day. We just didn't get to see it through."

The race came just three days after Busch's death sent shockwaves throughout the motorsports world and beyond. The 41-year-old Busch died after severe pneumonia progressed into sepsis, resulting in rapid and overwhelming complications, according to a statement released by his family.

The two-time Cup Series champion and winner of a record 234 races across NASCAR's three national series had become unresponsive while practicing in a Chevrolet simulator Wednesday, a person familiar with the situation told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because no details were released by the family.

Busch's family attended the race and NASCAR CEO Steve O'Donnell told them they are part of the NASCAR community and "we got you."

NASCAR and CMS honored Busch with his No. 8 and signature on the frontstretch grass and a highway billboard near the main entrance of the track. The U.S. Army Golden Knights carried a Busch flag prior to the race and each of the 39 cars in field carried a small, black No. 8 decal.

Kyle Larson won the first stage race. Hamlin won the second stage and Bell the third.

CRASHING OUT

Defending champion Ross Chastain crashed out when Ricky Stenhouse Jr. clipped his car in Turn 2 with 81 laps remaining in the race.

Connor Zilisch and Austin Cindric only made it 52 laps



Matt Kelley/AP photo

Daniel Suarez celebrates in Victory Lane after winning a NASCAR Cup Series auto race, Sunday, May 24 in Charlotte, N.C.

before getting caught up in a crash. Cindric got turned around and Zilisch came crashing in to the side of his No. 2 Ford, ending both drivers' day.

Chase Elliott, a two-time winner this year, hit the outside

wall and ping-ponged into the inside wall on Lap 90. That car was beyond repair and he finished 37th.

"I was trying to make something happen and I stepped over the line," Elliott said.

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