

# WILDLIFE WISE

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## Thanks for the Wild Turkey

A rustling of leaves breaks the early morning silence. Startled insects scatter below the hummus sensing the impending danger as the scratching and crackling of dry oak leaves gets louder and louder. One unlucky grasshopper sees a burst of light just as it is plucked up by a magnificent Tom and becomes sustenance for a great American bird. Although the Wild Turkey seems a simple animal and has been wrongly accused of not being very smart, the turkey has been important for many reasons to North Americans. In fact Ben Franklin argued that this beautiful bird should be our national symbol. Although it lost this recognition by one vote in Congress, it remains a symbol for many on

Thanksgiving Day of bountiful harvests.

The Wild Turkey (or American Turkey), not to be mistaken for the Domestic Turkey found in grocery store freezers, is the largest upland game bird in North America with a body length of 36 to 48 inches and a four to five foot wing span. Male turkeys, called Toms, are larger than females, hens, and have a remarkably different appearance. The Tom's head is featherless and its upper neck can be red to blue, purple or white depending on the season. If lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the elusive bird, it would appear in a shadow to be almost black, but in sunlight its feathers would gleam a metallic bronze with gold, red and green reflections. The hen's plumage is much less majestic and feathers and hairs cover her head. Her brown and grey coloring provide good camouflage as she guards her eggs on the forest floor. Toms have a black beard of hair-like feathers that can hang 12 inches from mid-breast and a fleshy snood protruding from the forehead above its bill which will inflate if the Tom is frightened or angered. Hens may have a short beard. Although both males and females have stout legs, a large upward curving spur can be found on the back of the Tom's legs to be used in defense and to dominate its flock.

Wild Turkey's use many different sounds to communicate. The loud single clucks are used to locate other turkeys, while a series of irregular clucks usually mean a Hen is lost and desperately searching for other turkeys. Although there are many other, the one turkeys are most famous for is the "gobble, gobble, gobble" typically heard from February to March. This sound marks the beginning of mating season and is used by these polygamous Toms to attract Hens. Toms continue to show off to the ladies by strutting, inflating their caruncles and elongating their snood. They raise their body feathers, fan their tails, and drop their wings to the ground. When the Hen is ready she crouches before him and her job has just begun. She will lay about a dozen tan eggs with dark brown speckles in a shallow depression surrounded by vegetation. The clutch will be ready to hatch about 28 days later. This is a very dangerous time because both she and the eggs are exposed to many predators on the forest floor. Raccoons, skunks, snakes and crows are just a few of the threats to the hen's clutch. Less than 50% of nesting attempts are successful.

When the young hatch, family broods will form and often multiple hen-brood rafters, or flocks, assemble. Hens that were not successful in mating form separate flocks as do adult males. About four days after hatching, when there yolks can no longer sustain them, poults are in search of high protein foods so will primarily feed on insects. In general, however, turkeys are opportunistic omnivores and will rely mostly on plants in their diet as adults. Turkeys do not migrate or hibernate so the types of plants in their diet will depend largely on the season. In fact, they can be tracked by following the v-shaped scratches left behind from foraging below the hummus for soft mast, hard mast, grain, grasses, or insects. In the event of extreme weather conditions when food may not be immediately available, turkeys can fast up to two weeks and lose up to 50% of their body

Due to their feeding and reproductive requirements, turkeys require large tracts of mature forest with open fields. Turkeys roost in low tree branches at night to protect themselves from predators such



A group of turkeys is called a rafter. Rafters of Wild Turkeys can be found in the lower 48 states and Hawaii.

as humans, coyotes, feral dogs, hawks, and bobcats. Their excellent eyesight and hearing, both better than a human, provide them a great advantage over their hunters. If the turkey is confronted with a threat it is well adapted to escape. Its thighs and legs have well developed muscles capable of efficient aerobic respiration to sustain a high speed run of up to 25 mph. Their flight muscles are equipped with muscles that allow them immediate and powerful bursts of flight in surprise that will fatigue quickly, but not before reaching speeds of up to 55 mph. The best view many may get of a Turkey will be from a car as they forage on the roadside in fields or clearings.

From when colonists first arrived in the United States until the early 1800's American Turkey populations were abundant in 38 states. During that time turkeys were used by Native Americans for ornamentation, clothing and by both Indian's and settlers as food. By the early 1900's, the lack of quality habitat due to the clearing of forests and

unregulated hunting resulted in less than 30,000 individuals remaining in the wild. After World War II, resources began to be pooled by state wildlife management agencies and the National Wild Turkey Federation to help reestablish populations in the wild. Artificial propagation of farm-raised turkeys was attempted first but was unsuccessful because their survival skills had not been developed. This prompted efforts to catch Wild Turkeys and release them in areas that were currently unpopulated. Catching these wary birds was not an easy thing to do. One wonders if many began to rethink the expression commonly used to call someone who is not so smart a "turkey". By using drop nets and cannon nets the turkeys were caught and moved. This project was a success; the turkey's began to thrive. By reintroducing Turkeys to different areas, protecting forests and regulating hunting, population increases were recorded across the continental US and Hawaii. Wild Turkey's had even been given some new haunts. The rehabilitation of Wild Turkey populations is a wildlife management success story.

#### Vocabulary

caruncles- growths on a turkey's neck that turn

bright red during mating or at times of high

stress.

poulta young turkey, less than a year old

precocial- offspring that are equipped to leave the nest within a few days of birth.

#### Find out more

http://www.nwtf.org/

National Wild Turkey Federation

http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/informa-

tion/Meleagris gallopavo.html

Animal Diversity Web

http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/wildlife/bird/mega/index.html

USDA Forest Service

http://www.enature.com/fieldguide/showSpeciesSH.asp?curGrou pID=1&shapeID=964&curPageNum=10&recnum=BD0171

eNature National Wildlife Federation

http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/scripts/lpsiis.dll/TN/TN B 9 a.pdf

Natural Resources Conservation Service Wildlife Habitat Management Institute

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