



The Wild Turkey

IN NEW YORK STATE

Often symbolizing America's Thanksgiving meal, the Eastern wild turkey is a magnificent bird that epitomizes the spirit of a survivor. These birds made an incredible comeback, largely through active restoration efforts, after being extirpated from New York State in the early 1840s. In fact, along with the bald eagle and the wood duck, the return of the Eastern wild turkey is perhaps one of America's greatest restoration success stories. Today wild populations of this striking North American native can be found across the state, frequently spotted feeding along the side of the road or in farm fields.

Shy, wary birds, wild turkeys are woodland species that prefer mixed areas of forest and farmland. They are social creatures, usually found in flocks. With keen hearing and superb eyesight, they can cleverly hide when danger approaches. Wild turkeys are excellent fliers, able to reach speeds of 40 to 55 mph over short distances when necessary. Usually, however, they prefer to walk or run to escape danger. At dusk, turkeys fly into trees to roost and spend the night. An entire flock may roost in a single tree, or in a number of nearby trees.

DESCRIPTION



Eastern wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) are very distinct-looking, large, dark-bodied birds. Males are especially impressive with 5 - 12 inch long beards of hair-like feathers on their chests, fleshy appendages on the head and neck (called wattles, snood or caruncle), and ½ - 1½ inch long spurs on the back of their legs which they use for fighting. In addition, they have red, blue and white skin on their heads during the spring breeding season, adding to their unique appearance. Also called toms or gobblers, mature males can reach 3 feet tall and weigh up to 25 pounds or more, though the average weight is 18 - 20 lbs. They have a variety of calls—the most distinctive is the gobble.

Female wild turkeys (called hens) are much smaller than toms, averaging between 9 and 12 pounds. They have rusty-brown bodies and blue-gray heads. Though uncommon, some hens (less than 15%) have a beard, and a few (less than 1%) have spurs. Hens make a variety of sounds, including yelps, clucks, purrs and putts.

REPRODUCTION

Breeding occurs from early April through early June. During this time, toms perform elaborate courtship displays—such as strutting, fluffing their feathers, dragging their wings and gobbling—in an effort to attract hens. After mating, each hen



goes off by herself to nest on the ground in woods, or along wooded areas in brush and in open fields. Hens lay 10 -12 eggs which hatch after 28 days. The hens then move their brood into grassy areas to feed on insects. Young turkeys (called poults) develop rapidly and can fly at 8 - 10 days old. Once able to fly, the birds will roost in trees at night.

DIET

Wild turkeys eat a wide variety of foods, which change with the seasons. Often, they will cover a square mile area or more in search of food. In spring and summer, turkeys feed on an assortment of plants and insects, such as tubers, snails, roots, flowers, fruits and grasshoppers. From late summer into fall, turkeys eat mast (beechnuts, acorns), as well as grapes, corn and oats. During the winter months, wild turkeys often form large flocks and reduce their range. At this time, they rely on what is left over from the fall, such as plants, nuts, seeds and fruits. They frequently spend time in farm fields feeding on waste grain and manure spread by the farmers. Spring seeps, which are usually free of ice and snow, are also favorite feeding areas. When a severe winter storm strikes, turkeys can spend as much as a week or more on the roost, waiting the weather out. Studies have shown that healthy wild turkeys can live up to two weeks without food.

Turkeys often scratch for their food, kicking up forest duff and leaves. Using their sharp claws, wild turkeys are able to dig through up to six inches of snow to find food.



PREDATION/MORTALITY

Turkey populations are affected by weather conditions. Cool, wet weather in the spring can be harmful for egg and chick survival. In addition, deep soft snow for a lengthy period can also cause mortality due to starvation.

Young turkey poults fall prey to mink, weasels, coyotes, fox, raccoons, skunks, snakes, owls and hawks. In their first few weeks before they are able to fly, the poults' only defense against predators is the ability to scatter and hide in a "frozen state" until the hen gives the all-clear signal. The hen will also try to distract any predators away from the young. Adult birds are eaten by foxes, bobcats, coyotes and great-horned owls. Many hens are killed by predators while nesting.



turkeys were released throughout the state. But these releases failed because the birds were not wild enough to survive in natural habitats. Meanwhile, wild turkeys had established healthy breeding populations in south-western New York, and were expanding rapidly. In 1959, a program was begun by the then Conservation Department to trap these wild turkeys for release in other parts of New York. Most of the trapping was done in winter.

About 1,400 wild turkeys were trapped and transferred to other parts of the state over the years. These birds adapted remarkably well, successfully reestablishing wild populations statewide, except for parts of New York City and Nassau County. The restoration effort was so successful that New York sent hundreds of wild turkeys to Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Connecticut, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Delaware and the Province of Ontario to help reestablish populations throughout the Northeast and Midwest.

The remarkable recovery of the Eastern wild turkey enabled hunters to once again pursue this wily quarry. Considered by many to be the grandest of game birds, there are now highly regulated spring and fall turkey hunting seasons, which are monitored closely by Department of Environmental Conservation biologists. The number of birds harvested has increased substantially over the years, as have overall turkey populations.

A spur on the back of the turkey's leg usually indicates a male (although an occasional female will have them). These ½ - 1½ inch long spikes are used in fighting. Generally, the longer the spike, the older the bird.



A RESTORATION SUCCESS

At the time of European colonization, wild turkeys were widespread throughout what is now New York State south of the Adirondacks. Over the years, however, their numbers were rapidly depleted. Turkey habitat was lost when forests were cut for timber and turned into small farms. The early settlers and farmers also hunted wild turkeys for food. The last of the original wild turkeys disappeared from New York in the mid-1840s.

In the late 1800s, farming began to decline and abandoned farmlands gradually reverted back to brush and woodland. Attracted to the habitat, around 1948 some wild turkeys from northern Pennsylvania crossed the border into western New York—the first birds in the state after an absence of 100 years.

The return of the wild turkey sparked an interest in restoring the species to all of New York. During the 1950s, game farm



Quick Facts about wild turkeys

- ❖ Can fly 40 to 55 mph.
- ❖ Can run 12 mph.
- ❖ Poults (young) can fly when 8 to 10 days old.
- ❖ Sleep or "roost" in trees at night.
- ❖ Form large flocks in winter.
- ❖ Males (called toms or gobblers) use the spurs on their legs for fighting.
- ❖ Females lay 10-12 eggs in a ground nest.
- ❖ Males gobble to attract females.

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