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# The Other Wild Turkey

by Diane Weyer  
Belize

A mosquito whined around my head and I raised a cautious hand as it settled on my cheek—missed. A moment later it was back with several companions. I sighed as the sweat ran off me in rivers. The closest turkey stretched out on its side and fluffed its wings in the leaf trash. None of the rest of the flock moved. I watched the clouds and cursed all turkeys and all clouds and all biting insects. After a long, hot morning I'd finally found the turkeys just as the sun disappeared behind heavy clouds that made photographing them impossible but which didn't relieve the heat at all.

Wild turkeys. Ocellated turkeys (*Meleagris ocellata*), are far more beautiful than their North American relatives, seemingly made of copper and bronze inlaid with jade, their heads carved of lapis lazuli and covered with coral bumps. But now they sprawled in the heat, their gorgeous plumage in eclipse in the deep shade, totally unaware that beneath them lay the ruins of a long-dead civilization. Ocellated turkeys have a limited range, existing only in a small area of southern Mexico, northeastern Guatemala and northwestern Belize. Two thousand years ago the Mayans lived in this area and today the best place to see wild ocellated turkeys is in the Tikal National Park in Peten, Guatemala, site of one of the greatest Mayan religious centers. Unfortunately, Dr. Leopold Starker's assumption, in *Wildlife Of Mexico, The Game Birds And Mammals* (1959), that these turkeys would increase as forest lands were cleared for milpa agriculture, has not proved true. While ocellated turkeys do like semi-open areas and do eat corn, (as well as fruits, insects, succulent vegetation and other seeds) they are shot out as soon as farmers move into an area. Like their relatives, the North American wild turkeys, they are excellent eating and are heavily hunted throughout their small range except in the few protected parks like Tikal.

A spot of sun moved across the jungle toward me and I grabbed for the camera, panicking the surrounding horde of mosquitoes. The vegetation around the natural opening where the turkeys were resting was so heavily shadowed that my

light meter was still not happy despite the sunlight that glinted off the turkeys. As I approached, first one and then another rose to their feet and began to walk away. In a minute or so all that showed in the viewfinder was turkey tails. Fortunately, two of the fourteen birds stopped for a last look at the intruder just before the jungle shadows engulfed them. Then only shadows amongst the shadows moved occasionally to betray their presence. I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and headed back to the Jaguar Inn for a very late lunch.

The North American wild turkey and the ocellated turkey are the only two turkeys in the world. Ocellated turkeys are roughly two thirds the size of North American turkeys, the males weighing up to eleven pounds and the females to six and a half. They lack the chest tuft of the North American species and the bare skin of their heads is blue instead of red. Male ocellated turkeys have no wattles, but rather, large blue knobs on top of their head which are covered in coral-red bumps and protuberances, as are the rest of their heads. The majority of the ocellated's feathers are iridescent copper, bronze, green and blue except for the tail feathers which are silver-gray with large iridescent eye spots at the end of each feather. These eye spots give the birds their name. The females are somewhat less spectacular but can still put most birds to shame.

These magnificent birds begin to court by the end of February or early March. The height of their courting season is in March and eggs are laid primarily in April, though one may occasionally see a male strutting and displaying as late as May or early June. At Tikal National Park, where they have learned that people won't shoot them, they will continue their performance even when a person is present, provided the person remains quiet. And it is well worth keeping still to be allowed to watch a male ocellated turkey strutting past his audience of five or six spellbound females. He drags first one wing and then, as he turns to strut back again, the other wing, each spread wide and just touching the ground so as to show off the bronze and green feathers. As he nearly always picks an

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open space in the full sun in which to perform, the effect is stunning. He keeps his tail fanned to display the eye spots and fluffs out all his body feathers, thus both making him look larger and showing each brilliant feather off to its best advantage. He calls frequently before and during his performance, giving a bell-like gobble that A. Landsborough Thomson describes as "ting-ting-co-on-cot-zitlung." Personally, I don't think that call can really be described in letters or words—it has to be heard. It appears to originate a long way down and the turkey makes a series of jerking motions while attempting to bring it out.

A friend of mine in Belize was chasing butterflies in a clearing an acre or two in extent which had been clear cut several years prior and had since grown up in brush around three to eight feet high. A female turkey flew up literally between his feet, nearly giving him heart failure. Despite her iridescent plumage, he didn't see her until she flew. I and two others heard his yell and looked in time to see the turkey flying off into the surrounding hardwood forest. (Ocellated turkeys take flight when alarmed, unlike their northern cousins who prefer to rely on their legs.) When we got there, he was examining 13 creamy white eggs heavily speckled with reddish brown. The one we measured was 68mm long and 48mm wide. The eggs were in a slight "body-moulded" depression in the grass and dead leaves under a small bush. A faded file card lists the date as June 18th, 1968.

Exactly a week later a man brought my mother ten eggs which looked identical to the ones we had found. The man said he'd found them that morning so she decided to try to hatch them. A quick canvass of the nearby village turned up a broody hen that the owner was willing to sell. Whatever the hen may have felt about moving, she quickly took possession of the turkey eggs though she could barely keep them all covered at once. Nine chicks hatched successfully. The down on their backs and wing stubs was black with yellow tips. They were bright yellow underneath. Each head was buffy yellow with a dark median stripe running down both head and neck. They were sturdily built chicks with large flesh-colored legs. Their bills were also flesh-colored with grey tips. Although they started out lively and apparently healthy, they quickly succumbed to a variety of chicken-carried diseases despite the best efforts of an English veterinarian who vaccinated them against everything he could.

Here in Belize, the ocellated turkey numbers have crashed in the past two





*An ocellated turkey in the Tikal National Park in Peten, Guatemala.*

years in a large forest area where they were previously common. As hunting pressure in the area would not seem sufficient to explain their loss, there is speculation that one or another chicken-borne disease may have been introduced into the population. Wild ocellated turkeys will occasionally come in and feed with flocks of barnyard chickens on the more remote farms in Belize if they are unmolested. In time this may prove more fatal for the species than uncontrolled hunting.

The first time I saw an ocellated turkey, it was from a landrover as it was fighting its way along a very bad Forestry Dept. track back behind the Maya Mountains where the pines had given way to hardwoods again. (In Belize the mountain vegetation is prescribed, not by altitude, which never rises above

4,000 ft., but by the underlying rock; where the basic rock is granite, we have pine trees; where limestone overlies the granite, we have tropical hardwood forest, more popularly known as jungle.) It was an hour or two before sunset and we were hurrying, trying to get off the worst of the track before dark. We topped a small rise and there was a female turkey and three young turkeys, about a third her size, standing in the track. She flew up the bank and disappeared from sight in the dense undergrowth at the edge of the track. Her babies followed her, scrambling up where their mother had flown. As the first two vanished, three more materialized out of the shadows onto the road. We counted eleven young turkeys before we started up again, thinking they were all across, when two more darted out vir-

tually under our wheels. I'll remember them when I'm ninety.

Since that first view, some 17 years ago, I've been privileged to see our small, brilliant wild turkey many times on many backroad and hiking trips. That sudden burst of color as they rise is something I never quite expect—they can't really be that stunning—but they are every time. But I don't see them as often as I used to, and the future looks non-existent for them. Large tasty birds in a small range where they are protected inadequately, if at all—the remaining ocellated turkeys are going to need a lot of help if they are to continue to survive, and so far that help has not been forthcoming, partly because these birds are so little known. They aren't even on the Red Data list yet and may well be extinct before anyone worries about them. ●