

# THE NORTH AMERICAN WILD TURKEY



LARRY PRICE, NWTF/Eastern subspecies

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**T**urkeys don't always gobble in December but the sound coming from over the ridge was unmistakable. I was in Southwestern New Mexico participating in a survey for Gould's turkeys and there was no doubt I would see turkeys as soon as I topped over the ridge and had a view into the valley below. And there they were: a dozen Gould's turkeys preparing to go to roost for the night. Only the jakes were gobbling while the mature gobblers were feeding and paying no attention to

the youngsters. The sight of 12 Gould's wild turkeys was great, but even better was when the sun appeared just before it dipped below the horizon and lit up the colorful plumage of the birds. Their broad white tail bands were particularly highlighted, looking nearly like strobe lights. It's a sight I'll never forget.

The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is found only in North America from central Mexico to southern Canada, and from the East Coast of the US to west of the Rocky Mountains. There is a second species of wild turkey found in the Yucatan Peninsula region, known as the Ocellated Turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*) it differs from the North American species

morphologically and behaviorally. Today we will be discussing the North American species and its six subspecies, five of which are still surviving.

I do not think Ben Franklin ever formally recommended the wild turkey as our nation's symbol but it would have been a suitable choice if the Bald Eagle had not been chosen. The wild turkey is a regal game bird, long utilized by Native Americans for food and ceremonial purposes. We all know the story of the Pilgrims, Thanksgiving, and the focus on turkeys for that fine American meal every November, but there is much more to the wild turkey than that particular limited historical perspective. It is likely the



PHOTOS BY MASLOWSKI, NWTF (ABOVE), NWTF (FACING PAGE)

**This page, Eastern subspecies. Following page, a nest of wild turkey eggs.**

Pilgrims knew about turkeys before they made their fateful journey nearly 400 years ago as the Spanish had brought wild turkeys to Europe from what is now Mexico by 1520. The bird brought to Europe by the Spanish, from southern Mexico was the Mexican turkey (*M. g. gallopavo*), described by Linneaus in 1758, and now thought to be an extinct subspecies. Thanks in part to the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving however, the best known turkey to most Americans (whether they know it or not) is the Eastern Wild Turkey (*M. g. silvestris*).

The other subspecies are the Florida (or Osceola) Turkey (*M. g. osceola*), the Rio Grande Turkey (*M. g. intermedia*), the Merriam's Turkey (*M. g. merriami*), and the Gould's Turkey (*M. g. mexicana*). The Eastern Wild Turkey is the most common and wide spread of all turkey subspecies and is found from the East Coast to the

Great Plains of North America, nearly completely within the U.S., but also along the southern edge of Canada. The Florida Turkey is a smaller representative of the Eastern Turkey, with slight differences in markings of its feathers, and is found only in Florida, below a line running southeast from Jacksonville. The Rio Grande Turkey is an intermediate form and its population is centered from Northern Mexico, through Texas to Kansas. The southern Rocky Mountain region, mostly Arizona, New Mexico, and southern Colorado is home to the Merriam's Turkey, while the Gould's Turkey is primarily a Mexican subspecies entering the US only in extreme southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

Male turkeys are known as gobblers, and females are called hens, with young birds (less than a year) are known as jakes (males) and jennys (females). Birds mature

at around 1 year of age and are capable of breeding at this time. Elaborate courtship displays are conducted by gobblers, with hens either being very interested or caring not at all depending upon their attitude that day. Gobblers earned their name based upon their loud, booming call, which is most often heard during the spring breeding season, but which may be heard at anytime of the year as well as anytime of the day. But the gobble is not the only sound turkeys make as there are at least 28 distinct calls reported.

Somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 feathers are found on the wild turkey, which undergo four distinct molts from natal to adult. Unlike most, but not all, birds, turkey feathers exhibit iridescence with copper, bronze, gold, green, and red colors found, especially on gobblers. Turkey tails usually have 18 large feathers. Gobblers stand up to 40 inches tall



while hens usually reach only 30 inches. Weights of wild turkeys vary from around 10 pounds for an adult hen to an average of around 20–25 pounds for adult gobblers, although gobblers of up to 35 pounds are not unknown in the eastern subspecies. Color variations do occur in wild turkeys with black, red, white, and smoky gray phase birds being reported.

Following breeding, hens will choose a suitable nest site and begin laying eggs. Eggs are laid one per day for 10–15 days, with around nine to 12 being considered average in many areas. After approximately 26 days the eggs all hatch at nearly the same time and within 12–24 hours the precocious chicks are ready to follow their mother looking for food. The next seven to 10 days are very dangerous for the poults, while they must spend their nights on the ground as they are unable to fly up into trees or small bushes to roost. So if you count back to the time the eggs are laid until the young birds can fly they are highly susceptible to depredation for



nearly 50 days. As a species which nearly every predator is looking to as a meal, wild turkeys often have a tough time surviving. However, this is where quality habitat and keen survival skills come in handy. Survival skills are well developed in wild turkeys and anyone who has tried

to outsmart one is often left wondering what went wrong. Domestic turkeys have a reputation for being dumb, and while this may or may not be true, it is definitely not true for wild turkeys. Adult wild turkeys display intelligence and a great ability to stay alive in a hostile world. Many

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turkey hunters consider an adult hen as the smartest animal in the woods. Over the course of the year, turkeys seem to just know where to find food, water, and suitable roost trees.

When young turkeys start to fly and are able to get off the ground they achieve a bit of security by being able to spend their nights roosting in trees. But just not any tree will do the job. Turkeys most often select the largest and tallest tree within a stand of trees to roost, and a tree with horizontal limbs. And as you may suspect the pecking order comes into play here. The most dominant birds claim the highest positions on the roost. Many species of ground dwelling birds spend their nights on the ground but the wild turkey has evolved to evade their many predators by moving out of reach of coyotes, bobcats, foxes, and other medium sized mammalian predators. If you wonder why you may not have wild turkeys in your area, a likely reason is the lack of suitable roost trees.

Other habitat features turkeys depend upon include areas where a mix of grass and low shrubs are found, as well as forest edges and fields, especially grain fields. Areas of dense shrubs or trees are often too thick to support turkeys, and hide predators as well. This is why proper forest management is so important to the health of wild turkey populations across the country. Overgrown, thick forests are no good for many species of wildlife, including wild turkeys. And I often tell landowners that one major positive thing they can do for wild turkeys, as well as quail and grassland bird species is to grow bugs! The best way to grow bugs is to grow grass and forbs (weeds). Grass and forbs often need water during the growing season to mature and not only provide seeds, but almost always host bugs. And turkey poults need bugs to grow. So if you want turkeys on your property grow bugs and develop roost sites. If only it were that simple!

Wild turkeys are often very obvious where they are found, and their natural distribution has expanded to include 49 states. Only Alaska is without wild



STEPHEN BAUER, NWTF/Eastern subspecies

turkeys, while they have been introduced even onto multiple Hawaiian islands. Wild turkeys are among the most successful wildlife restoration stories in North America. Around 1900 there were thought to be less than 30,000 wild turkeys in North America, although the number was likely higher than that. Today there are an estimated 7 million wild turkeys across their range.

Along with white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, Canada geese, and the wood duck, wild turkeys are one of the classic examples of the success of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, of which legal managed

hunting is a major component. Hunters have led the way in the conservation of countless wildlife species and millions of acres of wildlife habitat across the country and have paid for much of the effort through an excise tax on guns and ammunition since the passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937. Officially known as the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, an 11 percent excise tax is collected from all gun and ammunition sales to support wildlife conservation in all 50 states. Without this legislation it is scary to think what condition our nation's wildlife resources would be in today. Game and Fish Departments in every state depends





PHOTOS BY NWTF (ABOVE), HENRY ZEMAN/NWTF (BELOW)

**Above, Merriam's subspecies. Below, Eastern subspecies.**

upon Pittman-Robertson funds to function and because of this thousands of species of native plants and animals receive scientific management across the country.

Every spring, thousands of turkey hunters head to the woods in pursuit of a gobbler. Over the past 50 years turkey hunting has evolved from primarily a fall hunt to a spring hunt. Although many hunters still bypass the grocery store and get their Thanksgiving turkey in the fall. But the spring hunt is very exciting, trying to entice a gobbler into shotgun range, making him think he should come to calls the hunter is making to sound like a hen, instead of having the hen come to him. While it is anything but an easy hunt, it is very exciting. Most hunters still arrive home empty handed. But by participating in the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, hunters are paying the bills for all Americans to conserve all



wildlife species.

Even if you do not hunt, you can enjoy the North American Wild Turkey across

the country in many areas, even suburban areas. The Wild Turkey—it's not just for Thanksgiving anymore.