Who Are Turkeys?

The wild turkey is one of the largest game birds in the United States. They are one of only two domestic birds that originated from the United States. They are in the same family as many other game birds like pheasants, peafowl, and partridges. Many confuse this turkey for its close relative, which is the domestic turkey that is farmed for its meat. But there are several differences between the wild and domestic turkey. The domestic turkey does not have the speed or ability to fly like wild turkeys do because domestic turkeys have more meat, which weighs them down. Male domestic turkeys will also gobble at anything and have a higher pitched gobble than their wild cousins who only call when needing to avoid predators.

Although the wild turkey may not look too aesthetically pleasing, it is a majestic bird that caught the eye of such people as Benjamin Franklin who thought the turkey would be a better symbol for America than the bald eagle.

What Do They Look Like?

Wild turkeys are about three feet tall and males weigh up to 18.8 lbs., while the female is slightly smaller. These ground dwelling birds exhibit sexual dimorphism (where the females and the males are different in appearance), with the males being slightly larger and more extravagant than the females. Although a male wild turkey may appear to simply have black feathers, they actually have an iridescent tint. When the light is shining on the turkey’s feathers they appear to have hints of green, copper, gold, and blue.
Males also have many physical features that play a large role in their courtship behaviors. Male wild turkeys have a beard, which at first glance looks like hair sticking out of its chest. This is actually a group of modified feathers and can grow to be as long as nine inches. Males also have wattles on their necks that are pinkish in color. The males also have fleshy growths on the top of their heads called caruncles that are able to change color within a matter of seconds. Males, as well as females, have a snood located above their beak. Males can extend and contract the snood at will, causing it to hang over their beak, which is thought to be for mating behaviors.

The females are not as colorful as the males; they usually have breast feathers with tips of white, brown or grey. About 10 percent of female wild turkeys will develop a beard. Females tend to have very small feathers on their necks and into their heads, but this part of their body remains mostly bare showing off the white/blue tint of their heads.

**What Kind of Tracks Do They Make?**

The wild turkey has four toes on their feet. Three located in the front and one in the back. Their toes are long and slender, like their legs with the same reddish-orange coloration. The tracks will appear as long, slender lines in the snow or dirt. During mating season, long lines in the ground where the male turkeys were dragging their feathers in the dirt will flank these tracks. Males also have a spur on the back of their leg used for fights with predators as well as other male turkeys.

**What Are Their Senses Like?**

The wild turkey, like most birds, has an excellent sense of sight because of the location of their eyes on their head. They can have almost 300 degrees of sight without turning their head. Their eyes do not distinguish shapes too well but are very quick to detect motion. Although turkeys have no visible ears, they have small holes just behind their eyes which allow them to hear sounds from great distances. On the other hand, the wild turkey has a very poor sense of smell and taste. They will choose their food based on the size and shape instead of by tastefulness.

**What Is Their Place in Nature?**

Wild turkeys are often overlooked as a key organism in nature. These amazing birds have a dual role in nature that makes them so important to the ecosystem. The first role these birds play in
the ecosystem is predation. Predation is when one animal feeds on another in order to get energy. Wild turkeys will feed on many types of insects, rodents, and plants. This helps keep these populations from overcrowding others in the area.

The wild turkey is also prey to many other animals within that very same ecosystem. Many larger birds and reptiles will feed on wild turkey eggs when the mother is distracted. When the poult hatches, there are even more hungry organisms waiting to pounce. Large birds, reptiles, and many carnivorous mammals will eat the babies.

Are They Endangered?

Today there are over 7 million wild turkeys all throughout the United States. Although wild turkeys are not endangered now, this was not always the case. The wild turkey is one of the best success stories of a species being reintroduced into nature.

During the 1940s, the wild turkey population was declining quickly due to habitat loss and overhunting. In the 1960s, many state governments tried to reintroduce the domestic turkey into the wild thinking it would help rebuild the wild turkey population. This proved to be more difficult than what was originally thought, and governments soon found out that the domestic turkey would not survive in the wild like its cousin, the wild turkey. A new plan was formed to relocate wild turkeys from areas of less concern and transport them to areas where the populations were dwindling. This caused a drastic increase in the turkey populations soon building them up to 300,000 wild turkeys and eventually to the numbers we have today.

Conservation efforts are still in place to make sure the wild turkey population does not drop drastically as it did in the past. All states have policies about the appropriate time of the year to hunt wild turkeys as well as the amount of wild turkeys each hunter may take in a single season.

What Kinds of Adaptations Have They Made?

Due to the near extinction of the wild turkey in the early 20th century, these marvelous birds have adapted to living in many different types of environments. The wild turkey can be seen living in areas with as little as 15% vegetation, which is helpful in areas where development is increasing.
Turkey Habitat

The wild turkey has also developed the ability to live in just about any environment due to their long nails, used for scratching at snow and dirt. They also employ their strong sense of smell to look for organisms underneath the surface of the snow and dirt.

How Do They Hunt?

Wild turkeys are omnivores, which means they will eat both plants and animals. This means they are very well adapted for grazing on stationary plants, and are also able to hunt for small bugs, using their feet or beak to capture their prey. Due to the nature of their food, wild turkeys will hunt only to feed themselves (or their young), but they will hunt in family units comprised of many other adult turkeys.

Where Do Turkeys Live?

The wild turkey is found in 49 of the 50 states (all except Alaska). They can be seen as far north as southern Canada and as far south as Mexico. Many species have also been introduced into Europe and New Zealand. They are able to live in many different areas including in the forests on the edge of suburban areas. This is because they are very adaptable. The wild turkey needs an area of water close by, a few areas of shelter, an open area for mating, eating, and nesting, as well as herbaceous forests for roosting.

What Is Their Habitat in the Wild Like?

The Florida wild turkey is found on the panhandle of Florida, in areas of mixed forest and hardwood hammocks. Their darker coloration makes them a perfect candidate for the pinewoods, oak, and palmettos that are located in this part of Florida. The eastern subspecies of wild turkey is found more throughout the panhandle of Florida. Both species prefer to be around areas with vegetation that is no more than three feet tall. This allows the turkeys to use their long necks to see through or over the vegetation to check for predators.

How Do Turkey Families Live?

Wild turkeys are polygamous birds, which means they do not have the same mate for life. The male turkey will mate with many females within a season but it is unlikely that a female will mate with more than one male. On rare occasions if the first nest of eggs fails, the female will lay another. After the nest is laid, the male will go out to court other females.

Turkeys are usually seen in family units. Groups of females and males will hunt in the same area. This is to help raise young as well as to protect the group from predators. The females are very
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protective of their young. The poults will run and hide, remaining perfectly still in the brush until the danger has passed. The mother hen will also fake an injury to distract the predator while the young scatter.

What Is Their Life Cycle?
Around April, the males begin their courtship displays for the females. After mating with a female, the male will move on to another hen, leaving each hen to lay their own nest. Hens will lay an average of twelve eggs a year over a two-week period (about one egg a day). Wild turkeys are hatched from eggs that have been incubated for 28 days. A mother turkey will sit on these eggs even if the weather is bad. It is the best protection these eggs have from predators such as snakes and birds of prey. After the incubation period, the poults hatch and are up and walking within 12-24 hours. Unlike some birds, the babies can walk to find their own food very soon after they are born. They will hunt with their mother for the next couple weeks but will soon be left on their own to hunt.

What Does the Turkey Courtship Display Look Like?
In early April, the male turkeys start displaying for the females to attract their attention in hopes of mating. The display starts with a fanning of the feathers on the tail. These feathers can be as long as 12 to 15 inches. The mature males have feathers that are all one length, while juvenile males have shorter feathers along the edges of the fan.

After the fan of feathers is up, the male will ruffle all the feathers on the rest of their body. This gives the appearance that the turkey is larger than what it actually is. The male will then lower its wings so the feathers are touching the ground. The male turkey will then walk around a female occasionally grunting and vibrating its body. This will continue, gradually increasing in intensity until the female finally gives in.

What Is a Typical Day for the Wild Turkey?
As soon as the sun rises wild turkeys can be seen in the fields or other open areas grazing for food. At night the birds can be seen roosting in the trees of nearby forests. While the birds do hunt on the ground, they prefer to be higher up at night and will fly to the low branches of many trees.
References and Further Reading


