

Wild turkeys on the rise: at least until Thursday

BY SUSAN LOTH
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WASHINGTON — The wild turkey has something to gobble about. Its population is in the best shape yet this century.

This sleeker, cagier cousin of the domestic turkey has faced some hard times since the Pilgrims drew on a "great store of wild Turkeys" for their Thanksgiving in 1621.

The turkey declined steadily in the 1700s and by the 19th century was eliminated from most of its original 39-state range. North America's largest

game bird, *Meleagris gallopavo*, was the victim of overhunting and the loss of its woodlands habitat to man.

"Even as late as 1942, there were only an estimated 20,000 or 30,000 birds left in the entire country," said Gene Smith, editor of Turkey Call and an officer of the National Wild Turkey Federation. At that time turkeys were confined to 21 states, most in the Southeast.

Today, said Smith, there are an estimated 1.8 million wild turkeys in 49 states—all but Alaska. More than 40 states have spring or fall

turkey hunting seasons.

What turned the tide was wildlife management, with a little trial and error. Restoration efforts began after World War II with pen-reared wild turkeys. But problems arose, as Smith explained.

"The wildlife management profession discovered that pen-raised (wild) turkeys weren't truly wild. They weren't self-sufficient and they lost the wariness that let them survive."

The subsequent mingling of pen-reared birds with purebred wild turkeys caused other problems, Smith asserted: "It polluted the gene pool and introduced poultry diseases such as blackhead and fowlpox."

So instead, managers began using a trap-and-transfer program to move wild flocks from high-density areas to habitats where the species could flourish. Some turkeys are snared with rocket-fired nets, others are lured to eat a drugged bait, then wake up in a new home.

In the mid-1950s, ornithologist S. Dillon Ripley put several dozen wild turkeys on his family farm in northwestern Connecticut.

Today, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, estimates there are 200 or 300 wild turkeys on and around the farm.

"I like having them around simply because they're native—they were there 100 years ago and they represent an American thing," he said.

"As you know, Benjamin Franklin thought the turkey ought to be the national bird. He thought it was vulgar to pick the bald-headed eagle because it's a carrion-eater, whereas he thought the turkey a noble bird."

"I don't necessarily feel exactly the same, but I think they're awfully pleasant to see—if you ever can. They're hard to see."

That's because keen eyesight and a big streak of wariness are two of the bird's greatest assets. And once the turkey spots an unnatural shape or movement, it can fly to safety at speeds of up to 55 miles an hour, or take off at a run of 15 mph or more.



The wild turkey, Ben Franklin's candidate for our national bird, lost that campaign but is winning today's battle for survival. Found in every state but Alaska, it numbers an estimated 1.8 million.

Adult males and females travel in separate flocks. Their days are spent in search of nuts, berries, fruit, seeds, plants, and insects—or, during the spring breeding season, in search of the opposite sex. Gobblers and hens find each other by trading gobbles and calls—unless a hunter lures a tom into range by imitating a hen's call.

During courting the gobbler puts on his finest colors for hens. His iridescent brown tail feathers fan out, his fatter-than-usual chest puffs up, and the fleshy wattles hanging from his head and

neck fill with blood and turn bright red.

After mating, the hen takes on parenthood by herself. She builds a simple ground nest and lays about a dozen eggs. The poults that hatch some 28 days later can see, run around, and feed themselves almost at once. Within 10 days they can fly.

For when the sun goes down, the turkeys go up to tree limbs where they roost for a safer night's sleep. At least trees are the usual choice. A wild turkey foundling raised at a rural

Maryland home picked a more up-to-date roost: the neighbors' television antenna. Added his owner: "We promised to pay for any damages, but they said he improves the reception."

When a gobbler reaches full growth at age two, he could weigh as much as 35 pounds, although average weights are far less.

The wild turkey today is both outweighed and outnumbered by his domestic cousin.

The Agriculture Department said U.S. turkey production topped 167 million this year. Actually, domestic turkeys are descendants of North America's other turkey species, the oscillated turkey of Mexico. That bird was domesticated by the Aztecs, brought to Europe by Spaniards, and returned here by American colonists.

While wild turkeys aren't all destined for the dinner table, most can't look forward to old age, either.

"The record that we know of for a tagged or banded bird is 12 years," said Smith of the Turkey Call. Yet most turkeys don't make it past two years.

Although Smith calls the turkey's comeback "a tremendous success story," he warned that habitat preservation is a crucial issue. "We've got to mind our step in the years ahead or we'll see a decline such as they had at the turn of the century," he said.

"The population levels could go out, say in three years, if we continue to hack away at the hardwood forest and flood river bottom land, to remove the ideal habitat."

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