

## ***The wild turkey has made an incredible comeback***

***By: Corine Burgess***

*“For the truth the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird and withal a true original native of America... He is besides, though a little vain & silly, a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards who should presume to invade his farm yard with a red coat on.”-- Benjamin Franklin.* Apparently one of our founding fathers felt strongly that the wild turkey was a noble bird. This quote was taken from a letter that Mr. Franklin wrote to his daughter, Sarah Bache on January 26, 1784 criticizing the choice of the Bald Eagle as the national bird and suggesting that a turkey would have made a better alternative. Whether his opinion is valid or not, the wild turkey is truly an amazing creature.

The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) has made an remarkable comeback in the United States. When European settlers arrived in America, millions of these birds were spread through the forests of 39 states. But as with the buffalo, these birds were hunted almost to the point of extinction. After World War II, hunters, wildlife restoration groups, the states, and the Federal Government began protecting turkey habitat, enforcing hunting limits and reintroducing birds, which has resulted in their survival.

Five wild turkey subspecies are found in the U.S.; they include the Eastern, Rio Grande, Merriam's, Osceola (Florida) and Gould's. The Osceola is the only species found in Florida. There are about 80,000 to 100,000 birds in the sunshine state and they are named after the Seminole Chief Osceola. Wild turkeys like open areas for feeding, mating and habitat. They use forested areas to escape predators and for roosting in trees at night. A combination of both open and covered habitat is essential for wild turkey survival.

The male Osceola turkey, called a gobbler, is covered with between 5,000 to 6,000 iridescent feathers which vary from red, green, copper, gold and bronze. As with most birds, the male is more colorful than the hen, which is a somewhat drab brown. The darker color helps her blend in with her surroundings. The feathers serve both male and female turkeys in many ways. They keep them warm and dry, allow them to fly and are used to show off during mating rituals. The head and upper part of the neck are featherless and covered with tiny bumps on the skin.

Both sexes have long, powerful legs. The males will develop spurs on the back of their legs, which will grow pointed and curved and can reach over two inches long. The male will also grow a tuft of modified feathers from the chest called a beard, which can grow to be over nine inches long.

Unlike the domestic variety, wild turkeys are very agile and powerful flyers. Their wings are designed for short, fast flight, but by alternating gliding and flapping, they can cover a mile with ease and have been clocked at speeds of up to 55 mph. However, being a cautious and cunning creature, they usually walk to conserve necessary energy. They are also quite adept on the ground and can run up to 25 mph. They spend most time on the ground, and are very wary and will run away or fly to a tree at the first sign of danger. They have excellent vision during the day, but don't see well at night.

Turkeys are omnivores and their diet is made up of about 80 percent plant food and the remaining 20 percent is usually some type of insect. The young, called poults eat insects, berries and seeds. Once the poults reach adulthood they will eat anything from acorns and berries to insects, salamanders, snails and small reptiles. Fruits of wild grape, dogwood and wild cherry are favorites. Turkeys also eat numerous seeds, including those of native grasses, sedges, trees and ferns.

A source of open water is necessary to support a wild turkey population. They drink from spring seeps, streams, ponds, lakes and livestock watering facilities. It's critical to have water as well as foraging, nesting, brood rearing and roosting cover all available near each other to support populations.

Between February and April, courtship usually begins. Once mating has taken place, the hen begins the search for a suitable nest which is usually a shallow dirt depression surrounded by woody vegetation. She will lay a clutch of 10 to 12 eggs over a two week period. She generally lays one egg per day. Incubation is about 28 days and the hen often turns and rearranges the eggs until they are ready to hatch. Once the eggs are hatched, the new poults must leave the nest within 12 to 24 hours. At this time they begin feeding on insects, berries and seeds. Turkeys are known to feed in the early morning and in the afternoon.

For more information on wild turkeys you can visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute at [www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov) or, check the National Wild Turkey Federation at [www.nwtf.org](http://www.nwtf.org)

#### **Turkey facts:**

- The home range of a flock of wild turkeys is from 350 acres to 60,000 acres. Smaller areas work if all habitat requirements are met.
- The wild turkey we usually see in photos or pictures is not the same as the domestic turkey that we serve at Thanksgiving. Domestic or tame turkeys weigh twice what a wild turkey does and are raised on farms for profit.
- Most domestic turkeys are so heavy they are unable to fly.
- Wild turkeys are covered with dark feathers that help them blend in with their woodland homes. The bare skin on the throat and head (called the caruncle) of a turkey can change color from flat gray to striking shades of red, white, and blue when the bird becomes distressed or excited.
- The turkey's gizzard is part of the bird's stomach that contains tiny stones which help grind up food for digestion.
- The female turkey is called a hen; the male is called a tom or gobbler and the young are called poults.
- The snood is the flap of skin that hangs over the turkey's beak and the wattle is the flap of skin under the turkey's chin. Both the snood and wattle turn bright red when the turkey is upset or during courtship.