

Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo

Kingdom Animalia
Phylum Chordata
Class Aves
Order Galliformes
Family Phasianidae

Native to: North America.



Status: Least Concern

At one time the number of Wild Turkeys was really low; they were almost extirpated from Canada and only survived in small areas of the US. This was due to hunting and habitat loss. Protection efforts were made and were successful. The Wild Turkey population is stable and estimated to be around 7 million individuals. Humans are now the leading predator of adult turkeys.

Appearance & Lifespan

Adult Wild Turkeys have long reddish-yellow to greyish-green legs and a black body. Males have a large, featherless, reddish head and a red throat, and red wattles on the throat and neck. The head has fleshy growths called caruncles. Each foot has three toes, and males have a spur behind each of their lower legs. Turkeys have a long, dark, fan-shaped tail and glossy bronze wings. The male is much larger than the female, and his feathers have areas of red, purple, green, copper, bronze, and gold. Female feathers are duller, in shades of brown and gray. The primary wing feathers on both males and females have white bars. Males typically have a "beard" which is a tuft of coarse hair growing from the center of the breast. Beards average 9 inches in length. About 10 to 20 percent of females have a beard, usually shorter and thinner than the males.

The adult male normally weighs from 11–24 lbs and measures 100–125 cm (39–49 in). The adult female is much smaller at 6.6–12 lbs and is 76 to 95 cm (30–37 in) long. The wingspan ranges from 49–57 inches. The record-sized adult male Wild Turkey, according to the National Wild Turkey Federation, was 38 lb (17.2 kg). The lifespan of a Wild Turkey is usually 3-4 years in the wild but can be up to 13 years in captivity.



Behavior & Reproduction

Wild Turkeys are very agile fliers. Turkeys are very cautious birds and will fly or run at the first sign of danger. Turkeys have many vocalizations and can be heard up to a mile away. In early spring, male turkeys gobble to announce their presence to females and competing males. Hens "yelp" to let males know their location.

Males mate with as many hens as they can. Male Wild Turkeys display for females by puffing out their feathers, spreading out their tails and dragging their wings. When males are excited, a fleshy flap on their bill, wattles, and the bare skin of the head and neck all become engorged with blood, almost covering the eyes and bill. This behavior is known as strutting. Their heads and necks are colored brilliantly with red, blue and white. The color can change with the turkey's mood, with a solid white head and neck being the most excited. Courtship begins during the months of March and April, which is when turkeys are still flocked together in winter areas.

When mating is finished, females search for nest sites. Nests are shallow dirt depressions engulfed with woody vegetation. Hens lay a clutch of 10-14 eggs, usually one per day. The eggs are incubated for at least 28 days. The chicks leave the nest in about 12–24 hours.

Ecology & Conservation

The ideal habitat for Wild Turkeys is an open woodland or savanna, where they can fly beneath the canopy top and find perches. Wild Turkeys like open areas for feeding and mating. They use forested areas as cover from predators and for roosting in trees at night. A varied habitat of both open and covered area is essential for wild turkey survival.

Wild Turkeys are omnivorous, foraging on the ground or climbing shrubs and small trees to feed. They prefer eating acorns and nuts, but will also eat various seeds, berries, roots and insects. Turkeys also occasionally eat amphibians and small reptiles such as newts and snakes. Turkeys are also known to eat a wide variety of grasses.

At the zoo our Wild Turkeys eat scratch grain along with insects and plants they find around their exhibit.

Did You Know?

1. Turkeys have 5000 to 6000 feathers
2. Turkeys can run at speeds up to 25 mph, and they can fly up to 55 mph.
3. Wild turkeys have excellent vision during the day but don't see as well at night.

