

The Eastern Wild Turkey

by Michael E. Cartwright



The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallapavo*) occurs in every U.S. state except Alaska. This majestic bird is also found in Mexico and has been successfully introduced in Europe and South America. It occurs throughout Arkansas and ranks next to the white-tailed deer as Arkansas's most popular big game species. More than 30,000 sportsmen hunt turkeys in Arkansas each year, and thousands more enjoy watching and photographing this forest monarch.

Description and Distribution

The wild turkey is highly regarded for its wariness, keen senses, stamina and resourcefulness. Some even consider it downright intelligent. It is our largest game bird, similar in appearance to domestic turkeys, but smaller in size, more streamlined and with a smaller breast and legs. Adult males (gobblers) usually weigh 18-20 pounds and have spurs on the lower leg and beards (modified feathers) on the breast. Beards may reach 12 inches in length. Adult females (hens) normally weigh 10-12 pounds and lack spurs, but a few, usually less than 10 percent, possess small beards.

Habitat

The wild turkey is a forest species. Good turkey habitat has diverse forest cover types and ages and includes mature stands of mixed-hardwoods, groups of conifers, relatively open understories, scattered openings, some cropland and well-distributed water. An additional need is an adequate area to provide reasonable freedom from human disturbance.

Habits

Turkey movements vary by age, sex and season. Most turkeys live and die within five miles of their hatching site, although extreme movements of several miles can occur. Daily movements rarely exceed two miles. Annual ranges approach 8,500 acres in some areas, with hens generally moving farther than gobblers. Travel is normally by foot. Turkeys fly only to escape or roost.

Turkeys are gregarious and tend to group in families. Hens with broods form summer flocks. During autumn, flocks consist of females and current young of the year, old hens without broods, young gobblers and old toms. Flocks disband in early spring with the onset of the breeding season.

Ninety percent of the turkey's diet is plant material. Important autumn and winter foods include acorns, dogwood fruits, native legumes, clovers, grasses, pine seeds and grasshoppers. Spring and summer foods include acorns, clovers, wheat, insects, snails, blackberries and grass and weed seeds. Young turkeys (poults) eat large quantities of insects and other small animals.

Reproduction

Turkeys are polygamous, meaning an adult gobbler mates with several different hens during the breeding season. The first warm days of spring stimulate gobbling in males and signal the approach of the mating season which extends from late March through May in Arkansas. Initial gobbling activity quickly reaches a peak, however few hens are receptive to mating. As hens become receptive, gobbling activity decreases, because little is needed to attract a hen. Egg laying and incubation follow mating, and hen visits to adult gobblers decrease. At this time, gobbling activity increases again, reaching a much higher peak that coincides with the period of maximum incubation.

The average clutch size is 11 eggs. Usually two weeks are required to lay a clutch, with the incubation period lasting 28 days. Most eggs hatch around June 1st. Turkeys nest on the ground in a variety of places, including fallen treetops, vines and deep grass. Most hens reneest if a clutch is destroyed before incubation starts. Young turkeys grow fast and can fly after one week.

Normally, no more than 50-60 percent of nesting hens are successful in bringing off a clutch. Fifty percent or more of the hatched young may die before three weeks.

Importance

Turkey hunting provides a very important recreation opportunity for Arkansans and adds valuable dollars to the state's economy. Current recreational surveys indicate each Arkansas turkey hunter spends \$275 a year on goods and services related to their sport. With an annual legal harvest of more than 7,000 turkeys, the food value alone amounts



to more than 35,000 pounds of delicious, edible meat.

Management

Successful wild turkey management requires maintenance of adequate habitat, hunting controls and knowledge of populations. Public and private land management includes coordinated timber management activities and direct habitat improvements.

Wild-trapped birds are stocked in areas with suitable habitat. All stocked areas are automatically closed to turkey hunting until flocks are well established.

Research and survey projects include annu-

al summer brood surveys, harvest surveys, hunter surveys, gobbler count surveys, collection of flock condition data and disease monitoring. The information is used in assessing population status and developing management programs.

The wild turkey was almost extinct in Arkansas about 70 years ago. The restoration and return of the wild turkey is one of Arkansas's greatest wildlife management success stories. With continued scientific management and public support for programs, the wild turkey's future looks even brighter in the Land of Opportunity.



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