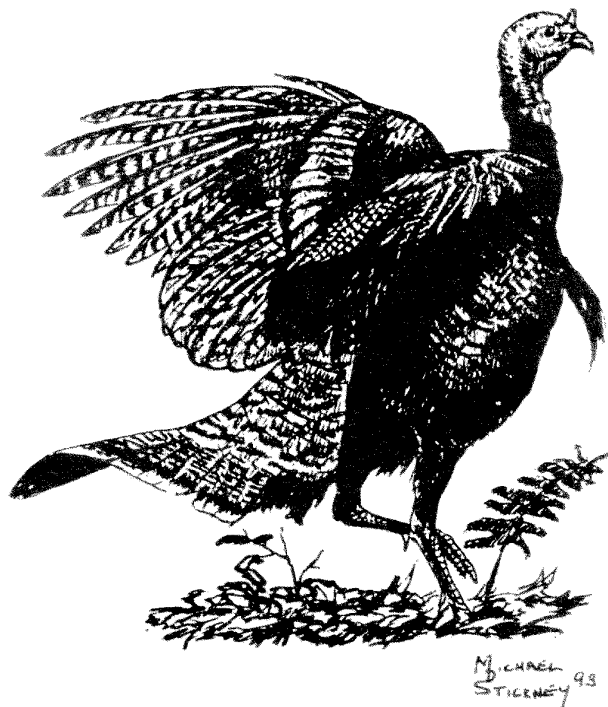


The Wild Turkey
in
New York



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DESCRIPTION

The Eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo sylvestris*) is a large and truly magnificent bird. Adult males, also called “toms” or “gobblers,” have red, blue and white skin on the head during the spring breeding display. They have a long beard of hair-like feathers on their chests and leg spurs that can be from ½ inch to 1 ½ inches long. Their call is a gobble. The tom has a dark black-brown body. Mature males are about 2 ½ feet tall and weigh up to 25 lbs. The average weight is 18 to 20 lbs.

The females (hens) are smaller than toms and weigh 9 to 12 lbs. Hens have a rusty-brown body and a blue-gray head. Less than 15% of females have a beard, and less than 1% have spurs. The hen makes a yelp or clucking noise.

HISTORY

The wild turkey is native to North America. Turkeys were widespread when the Europeans arrived and may have pre-dated the earliest human inhabitants. At the time of European colonization, wild turkeys occupied all of what is currently New York State south of the Adirondacks.

Turkey habitat was lost when forests were cut for timber and turned into small farms. The early settlers and farmers also killed wild turkeys for food all year round, since there were no regulated hunting seasons. The last of the original wild turkeys disappeared from New York in the mid-1840's. By 1850, about 63% of the land in New York was being farmed. This trend continued until the late 1800's when about 75% of New York State was cleared land.

In the early 1900's, farming began to decline. Old farm fields, beginning with those on the infertile hilltops, gradually reverted to brush and then grew into woodland. By the late 1940's, much of the southern tier of New York was again capable of supporting turkeys. Around 1948, wild turkeys from a small remnant population in northern Pennsylvania crossed the border into western New York. These were the first birds in the state after an absence of 100 years.

RESTORATION

The return of the wild turkey sparked an interest in restoring the species to all of New York. In 1952, a state pheasant farm in Chenango County was converted to raise turkeys; over the next 8 years 3,100 game farm turkeys were released throughout the state. These releases failed because the game farm birds were not wild enough to avoid predation. Because survival and natural reproduction was low, the populations failed to expand or even persist.

In southwestern New York, the wild turkeys from Pennsylvania had established healthy breeding populations and were expanding rapidly. In 1959, a program was begun by the State Conservation Department to trap wild turkeys for release elsewhere in New York.

Most of the trapping was done in the winter when natural foods are not abundant. A flock of turkeys was lured with piles of corn or other grain. When most of the birds were concentrated on the food pile, the turkeys were captured by shooting a large net over them. Wildlife staff put the birds into crates, and transported the birds to other areas with suitable

unoccupied habitat. A typical release consisted of 8 to 10 females and 4 to 5 males. These birds would form the nucleus of a new flock and generally were all that was necessary to establish a local population.

Since the first turkeys were trapped in Allegany State Park in 1959, approximately 1,400 birds have been moved within New York. These 1,400 birds have successfully reestablished wild populations statewide, except for parts of New York City and possibly Nassau County. In addition, New York has sent more than 300 wild turkeys to the states of Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Connecticut, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Delaware and the Province of Ontario, helping to reestablish populations throughout the Northeast.

BIOLOGY

The turkey breeding season begins in early April and continues through early June. During this time, the toms perform courtship displays -- strutting, fluffing their feathers, dragging their wings and gobbling -- all in an effort to attract willing hens. A single tom will mate with many hens.

After mating, the hen goes off by herself to nest. Her loosely formed nest is usually in a wooded area, but can be in brush or an open field. Over a 2-week period, the hen lays 10 to 12 eggs which hatch after 28 days of incubation, usually late May or early June. The hen moves her brood into grassy areas where the young poults can feed on the abundant supply of insects. The poults can fly when they are about 2 to 3 weeks old; from then on they will roost in trees at night.

During midsummer, 2 or more broods will often merge together to form a flock. These flocks range over a wide area and move around frequently in search of food. In late summer and early fall, the flocks begin to spend more and more time in the woodlands feeding on fruits, seeds, nuts, and acorns.

During the winter, turkeys reduce their range, diminish their daily activities and often form large flocks. They frequently spend time in valley farm fields feeding on waste grain and manure spread by the farmers. Spring seeps, which are usually free of ice and snow, are also favorite feeding areas. When a severe winter storm strikes, turkeys can spend as much as a week or more on the roost, waiting the weather out. Studies have shown that healthy wild turkeys can live up to 2 weeks without food.

FOODS

In the spring and summer, adult wild turkeys feed on a wide variety of plants and insects, such as tubers, dragonflies, snails, roots, flowers, fruits and grasshoppers. In the fall, turkeys feed on beechnuts, acorns, grapes, corn and oats. During the winter months, they depend on anything left from the fall, such as green plants, nuts, seeds and fruits; in agricultural areas they depend heavily on waste grain, manure and silage. They are able to scratch through 4 to 6 inches of snow

to find food. Turkeys can move long distances to find food, but will stay in a small area if food is locally abundant. Feeding turkeys during harsh winter months is generally not recommended nor needed.

MORTALITY AND PREDATION

The young poults are preyed upon by mink, weasels, dogs, coyotes, raccoons, skunks and snakes. Their only defense against predators is the ability to scatter and hide in a frozen state until the mother gives the all-clear signal. The hen will also fake injury (a broken wing) to lead predators away from the young. Cool, wet weather will cause young chicks to die of hypothermia. Sixty to 70% of the poults die during the first 4 weeks after hatching. Adult birds are preyed upon by foxes, bobcats, coyotes and great-homed owls. Many hens are taken by predators while nesting. More than 6 to 8 inches of soft snow, for over a 5 to 6 week period, can also cause mortality due to starvation.

HUNTING

Humans have been an important predator of wild turkeys for thousands of years. For most of that time, there were no controls or limits as to when, how, or by whom turkeys could be harvested. In order to ensure that turkeys remain part of our wildlife heritage for future generations to enjoy, wild turkeys are now legally protected as a game species in New York. There are now highly regulated spring and fall turkey hunting seasons, which are closely monitored by state biologists. The number of turkeys harvested in New York State has increased substantially over the past 15 years, as have overall turkey populations.

The spring season, which takes place during the month of May, has little or no impact on the population. Because only “bearded” birds are legal, the spring take is almost totally restricted to males. Since the season occurs after most of the hens have been bred, the females are able to nest and produce a new generation of wild turkeys.

During the fall season, both hens and toms may be taken. Because excess female harvest can affect turkey populations, the length of the fall season and the bag limit varies throughout the state, depending on turkey abundance. The season starts as early as October 1 and ends as late as mid-November.

DID YOU KNOW . . . turkeys can fly 40 to 55 m.p.h.

. . . can run 12 m.p.h.

. . . turkey restoration in New York was funded through hunting license sales and special taxes collected on sales of firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment.



NYS Department of Environmental Conservation



NYS Chapter, National Wild Turkey Federation

For additional information on wild turkeys, contact your regional DEC office or nearest NWTf chapter.