

## November 2009: Meditations on Wild Turkeys

If you feel like you've been seeing a lot of turkeys lately, it's not just because you have Thanksgiving on the mind. Now is the time of year when wild turkey hens and their poults flock together and forage in fields and along forest edges. Some toms and young males, called jakes, will form smaller bachelor flocks during this season when breeding and male rivalry is not foremost in their minds.

These flocks are eating mostly waste grains, wild plants, and insects, but they also prefer high-carbohydrate mast (nuts and fruits) such as acorns, beechnuts and crabapples to help get them through the winter. The acorn crop this year seems to be a good one compared to the past two autumns, which bodes well for the turkey population. Turkeys need to bulk up now to help them make it through cold, snowy winters like we've experienced for the past two years. Those hard winters combined with a poor mast crop has taken a toll on New England's turkey population.

Of course, many turkeys have survived by learning to supplement their diet at our bird feeders and in our vegetable gardens. Deliberate feeding of turkeys is discouraged by wildlife managers, because concentration of too many birds in a small area makes them more susceptible to disease and poaching. Turkey feces can carry *Salmonella* bacteria, as well, a disease that can be of particularly high risk to small children, the elderly, and even our pets. To help discourage turkeys from invading your backyard feeder area, use birdseed that doesn't include corn and keep the ground clear of fallen seed. For the most part, a turkey's going to go where a turkey wants to go, but these measures will at least diminish the allurements of your yard. Friends report that turkeys seem unfazed by electric garden fences—not even bothering to fly over but simply walking between the wires.

The amazing thing is that turkeys are becoming a "pest" bird at all. Wiped out in Maine in the 1800s due to land-clearing and over-hunting, the wild turkey is a reintroduction success story. In the late 1970s the state first released 41 Vermont turkeys in southern Maine. Now, with an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 wild turkeys in the state, flocks are an increasingly familiar sight all over southwestern, central and coastal Maine. Turkeys now inhabit 11 of Maine's 16 counties, according to Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and the turkey hunting season (for toms only) has expanded over the years proportionately.

North America's largest game bird, the crafty wild turkey has few natural enemies. Even a coyote will rarely make a dent in a flock of turkeys, and I've heard that hunting turkeys is much more challenging than you would think for this relatively large avian target. But while their biggest enemy is probably us, I'm not referring to our hunting but our driving. Driving around the rural mid-coast area, I have several times narrowly missed hitting a turkey. And many others out there haven't been so lucky—I've heard of several turkey-car collisions among my friends, including one which resulted in a completely shattered windshield. Although turkeys have the ability to fly almost straight up like a helicopter, for some reason they often take a low trajectory when they flush

from the roadside. A fast-flying turkey can reach speeds of more than 50 miles per hour. A male turkey can weigh up to 20-something pounds, and a female around ten. If you're driving, say, even 35 miles per hour down some back road, you don't need to be a physicist to imagine the damage that can do to a car (let alone the poor turkey).

When given the choice, however, these agile birds prefer to cross the road on foot, and they can do that quickly too. Turkeys sprint at speeds of up to 18 miles per hour, easily outrunning a person. I once stopped my car to let a flock pass. These birds were in no hurry, so I had plenty of time to observe all 23 lovely ladies, admiring the iridescence of their feathers in the late afternoon light. I remember the exact number because this happened during the Christmas Bird Count and in our count area, and I could thus add them to our day's tally of individual birds. A further indicator of their local success: wild turkeys are now a regular and expected species on the Thomaston-Rockland Christmas Count, and, depending on your count area, it can be embarrassing if you don't see any on the big day.

While generally seen less often because he leads a more solitary life, a displaying tom turkey is about as unmistakable as bird as they come—gobbling, puffing out his breast, fanning his tail, his red neck wattle engorged—the true embodiment of the typical Thanksgiving table topper, as well as male showboating. While walking a forested section of the Beech Hill Preserve in Rockport for a spring bird survey, a friend and I watched a big tom strutting his stuff and gobbling up a storm right in front of us, utterly oblivious to his human audience. It was difficult not to laugh out loud and scare him away, though he might not have even heard us over his gobbling, which apparently resonates for up to a mile away.



Photo courtesy of Pennsylvania Game Commission.

Upon selection of the bald eagle as our country's national symbol, Ben Franklin famously wrote in a letter to his daughter Sarah, "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." You have to wonder how serious he was about preferring the turkey for our national bird, but his description of the tom's personality seems apt.

Unlike the much flashier and non-native pheasant, which has much less success surviving our winters, the wild turkey is an indigenous American creature. After contact with the Aztecs in the early 1500s, the conquistadors brought back wild turkeys from Central America to Europe, where they were then selectively bred into the various domestic butterball breeds which ultimately became the centerpiece of our traditional American Thanksgiving dinner. Turkeys feature in the lore and mythology of many native tribes, particularly those in the Southwest, where they had been domesticated for centuries.

Legend has it that if a Thanksgiving feast was actually celebrated in Plymouth Plantation in 1621 by the surviving colonists and members of the Wampanoag tribe, the native Americans brought venison and wild turkey to the table. Interestingly, some histories claim the Pilgrims brought their own farm turkeys from Europe when they sailed to America in 1620—thus creating an ironic circle of events in which the Spanish brought wild turkeys back from Central America to become domestic European turkeys which were then brought back to North America by the colonists 100 years later, ignorant of the fact that wild turkeys were already here (albeit a different sub-species than the Central American ones). And in a different way, human intervention via the turkey reintroduction program has once again brought turkeys back to New England. History does indeed repeat itself, most often in ways we'd never have anticipated.