



Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo

2018 | YEAR OF THE BIRD 

2018 marks the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, considered by many to be the most powerful and important bird-protection law ever passed. In honor of this milestone, National Geographic, the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and BirdLife International are joining forces with more than 100 other organizations, including the National Park Service, and millions of people around the world to celebrate 2018 as the “Year of the Bird.” As part of this celebration, NETN’s Species Spotlight series will focus on a different bird species each month throughout the year.

Wild Turkeys are a wildlife conservation success story. Due to habitat loss and hunting pressures, they became locally extinct throughout much of their historical range by the beginning of the 20th century. Natural reforestation and a reintroduction program have led to them occurring in every state save Alaska at this time.

Ties to the Tyrant Lizard King?

Have you ever looked at the legs and feet of a Turkey and thought that is how dinosaur feet must have looked? Turns out you may be on to something. Yep - the staple of many Thanksgiving feasts can trace its heritage all the way back to the most famous dinosaur of the all: the Tyrannosaurus Rex. The proof is in the bird’s wishbone (a feature of all bird species). This *furcular* bone is formed by the fusion of two collarbones, and serves as the connecting point for muscles and a brace for the wings. As a bird flies, the wishbone acts like a spring - storing then releasing energy. This elasticity is also the reason snapping a wishbone before it dries is

such a challenge. This bone can be traced way back to 150 million years ago to some groups of dinosaurs, including T. rex and Velociraptors.

What Goes Around Comes Around

Wild Turkeys hold the distinction of being one of only two “New World” species to be domesticated (the other is another bird species - the Muscovy Duck). Though the bird that ends up on many a family’s Thanksgiving Day

table bares little outward resemblance to its wild cousin. Those Butterballs and Purdues are more closely related to a subspecies of Wild Turkey domesticated by Central American natives almost 2000 years ago. When the Spanish encountered them in the 1500’s they were so impressed they brought some back to Europe. Centuries later, when European migrants sailed across the ocean blue they brought with them the descendants of those world travelling turkeys.

I Can Fly 55

While their domestic cousins are virtually flightless due to their shorter wings and overly large breast muscles, Wild Turkeys can take to the wing when necessary. In fact, they have been clocked flying up to 55mph (they are no slow-poke on the ground either, running at speeds up to 25mph). For a bird that can weigh well over 20lbs, flying at top-speed turns it into a practical feathered wrecking ball - as anyone who has hit one with their car can attest.

Flying is a good way for the birds to avoid potential predators - which are many. These large birds are favorite meals of coyotes, red fox, bobcats, raccoons, large fishers, and many raptors. Flying allows the birds to perch together in trees to safely spend the night out of the reach of most of these, or at least make it more difficult for them to approach unnoticed.

Snoods and Wattles

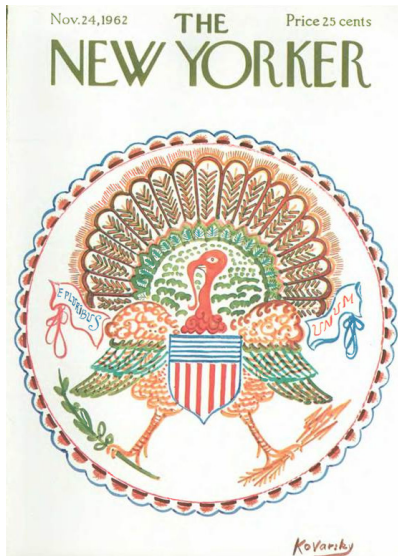
Wild Turkeys are a treasure trove of nicknames and fun-to-say body parts. Several terms describe their age and sex: Jake (young male), Jenny (young female), Tom (adult male), Gobbler (breeding adult male - females never gobble) and Hen (adult female). Very young ones are either known as chicks or poults.

As for body parts - snoods and wattles are the fleshy appendages on a male Turkey’s head, and come mostly into prominence during breeding season. The snood drapes over the bill and the wattle is the pouch-like bib that hangs below the chin. The head, neck, snood and wattle all become a bright red, contrasting to his blue head, when the male turkey is ready to mate and he



John B. / Flickr

A full-grown Tom Turkey in full on-strutting display.



1962 New Yorker magazine cover that helped perpetuate the Franklin-Turkey myth.

begins to “strut”. This is the spring mating dance they use to attract and retain their “harem” of female turkeys and is the classic image of a Tom: tail feathers fanned out, wings dragging on the ground, swollen bright red wattle and snood, blue head, gobbling away, and proudly strutting to challenge other males and attract potential mates.

The National Symbol?

One of the favorite myths about Benjamin Franklin is that he advocated for the Wild Turkey to become our national symbol over the Bald Eagle. As the saying goes - why let facts get in the way of a good story? Like all good myths, it is partially drawn from truth. It all stems from a letter in which he wrote to his daughter in 1784. This private letter, never meant for a wider audience, expounds upon a wide range of topics - including the seal of a hereditary club called the Society of the Cincinnati - which to Franklin resembled a Turkey more than an Eagle. From here he goes on to lament the choice of the Eagle as the national symbol (chosen just the prior year in 1783) because of its moral flaws, comparing them to what he considers the good traits of a Turkey (see inset). So while he does appear to like Turkeys better, he never publicly advocated for Turkeys to be the national symbol and was only trying to amuse his daughter in a private letter.

“... Bald Eagle...is a Bird of bad moral Character. He does not get his Living honestly. . . [he] is too lazy to fish for himself. For the Truth the Turkey is in Comparison a much more respectable Bird . . . 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.”

-1784 Benjamin Franklin letter to his daughter

Paul Hurtado/Flickr



A flock of Wild Turkeys (known as a “rafter”) roost high up in the tree tops for the evening.

Tall Tryptophan Tales

While on the subject of Turkeys and myths, we might as well address perhaps the most common myth about these birds (who knew Turkey lore was so full of intrigue and scandal?): eating turkey on Thanksgiving makes you sleepy because it is loaded with tryptophan. Tryptophan is a component of the brain chemical serotonin, and eventually is converted into the well-known sleep-inducing hormone of melatonin. While it’s true Turkey contains this chemical, it doesn’t really have any more of it than chicken or other poultry. In fact, many other common foods have quite a bit more of it. It’s a minor miracle Vermonters aren’t constantly comatose when you consider cheddar cheese contains quite a bit more of the stuff than turkey!

No - food science tells us that it isn’t the Turkey making you sleepy, but the copious amounts of carbohydrates (stuffing, potatoes, yams, etc.) and perhaps wine and/or beer that is often consumed along with it.

For more information

- Watch a Tom Turkey strut his stuff: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuRuBVqk61A>
- For info on NETN’s long-term Breeding Landbird monitoring program see <https://www.nps.gov/im/netn/breeding-landbirds.htm>.



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