# Wild Turkey

*Meleagris gallopavo*

November 2016

## Field Notes

A wild turkey tom in courtship display, showing its beard. LEN BLUMIN, Creative Commons.

### General Description

A wild turkey is a large, heavy bodied bird with long legs and a disproportionately small head compared to its body. Larger than most birds, males weigh on average about 16 pounds with a 64-inch wing span and females weigh about 9 pounds with a 50-inch wingspan. Other than a larger size, males (toms) differ from females (hens) in having ruffled feathers, a fan-like tail, red wattles on the throat, and a beard. Interestingly, the beard comes from the breast and grows until death. There are two species in the genus *Meleagris*: the North American native, *M. gallopavo*, and *M. ocellata*, native to the Yucatan Peninsula. Fossils of an extinct species, *M. californica*, have been found in California.

### Range and Populations

*Meleagris gallopavo* is native to the eastern United States, generally east of the Mississippi River. Wild turkeys make exceptional table fare, and as a result their populations and range had become quite diminished by the 1920s. Overhunting, in conjunction with habitat loss, extirpated them from some states. Reintroduction and new introductions of wild turkeys west of the Mississippi River have been very successful. Currently the bird can be found throughout the lower 48 states, Hawaii, and southern Ontario, with large populations in Texas. Most wild turkeys, however, occur in their native range east of the Mississippi.

### Habitat and Diet

In general, wild turkeys prefer hardwood or coniferous forests that have brushy areas and scattered openings, including marshes and riparian areas. Each of the five subspecies of wild turkeys found in the United States has slightly different habitat preferences. Two subspecies occur in our area: Rio Grande wild turkey (*M.g. intermedia*) and Merriam's wild turkey (*M.g. merriami*). The Rio Grande subspecies prefers brushy areas near streams and pine/oak forests. Merriam's subspecies is typically found in pine forests and pinyon-juniper woodlands, generally in hilly or mountainous areas.

Wild turkeys are omnivores. Like habitat preferences, diet preferences among subspecies also differ. But broadly speaking, common turkey forage includes acorns, nuts, seeds, berries, agricultural crops (sweetclover, grasses, and alfalfa), insects, and invertebrates. Along with these foods, you may see a turkey eating small pebbles, which end up in its gizzard to help grind food, since turkeys do not have teeth. Wild turkeys also drink from open water sources.

### Life History

Turkeys are ground nesters, and lay 4–18 eggs in a clutch. After about a 28-day incubation period, eggs begin to hatch. Within an incredibly rapid 12–24 hours of hatching, a young turkey (poult) is up, out of the nest, and walking around in search of food.

A wild turkey hen at nest. PUTNEYPICS, Creative Commons.

### Fun Facts

—Unlike their domesticated counterpart, wild turkeys are good flyers, and often avoid predators by flying up into trees. Turkeys will also roost for the night in trees.

—The English common name of turkey is likely a holdover from a time when the birds were being shipped from the Americas to the country of Turkey, before eventually arriving in Europe for sale. Since the birds were from Turkey, they were called turkeys.

—In a letter to his daughter, Benjamin Franklin spoke of his preference for the turkey over the bald eagle as a symbol of the United States. He referenced the 'bad moral character' of the eagle, also calling it a 'rank coward,' and he praised the turkey: 'though a little vain and silly, a bird of courage.'

### Where to See

You can find wild turkeys in three Klamath Network parks: Lassen Volcanic, Lava Beds, and Whiskeytown.

### References and Further Reading

https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs143_009939.pdf

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/wild_turkey/id