Eastern Wild Turkey

Now a common sight, turkeys were once gone from the Granite State

On a late-summer walk, I see a group of wild turkeys course through the old pasture, chasing grasshoppers. Oblivious to me, they head up a nearby oak ridge and begin scratching about for acorns and probably a few beechnuts. I smile, reflecting on the fact that this familiar sight would not have been possible forty years ago, when these distinctive birds had been completely gone from the New Hampshire landscape for more than a century.

Today wild turkeys are a common sight in the Granite State. It’s hard to miss a bird that stands 2-3 feet tall – though they can be hard to see against the backdrop of the woods. As this flock moves among the trees, I admire the brilliant, iridescent, dark-brown plumage with rich copper, green and bronze highlights. The Eastern wild turkey is a streamlined version of the domesticated variety. Its tail feathers have buff-brown tips, unlike domestic turkeys, which have white-tipped feathers.

I try to pick out the genders in the group. It’s pretty easy to tell the adult males, called “gobblers” or “toms.” For one thing, male turkeys are bigger than the females; they can weigh 16 to 24 pounds and have wingspans up to 5 feet or so. Male turkeys have black-tipped breast feathers that make them look iridescent and darker than females. The toms also have fleshy appendages on their head and neck, called “wattles,” “snoods” and “caruncles.” This time of year, males’ heads tend to be pinkish, a little dull. But in the spring during breeding season, their heads take on a fowl version of the Fourth of July, turning a brilliant red, white and blue.

If that’s not enough to set the males apart, they’ve also got spurs on their lower legs and a 5 to 12-inch “beard” (bristle-like feathers that protrude from their chests). Both sexes have long, powerful legs, which are covered with scales. Both males and females have a small button spur on the back of the leg. Soon after birth, a male’s spur starts growing pointed and curved; it can grow to about two inches long.

Females, or hens, weigh an average of 9 pounds. Their breast feathers have light brown tips. Hens usually have bluish heads that are more completely feathered than gobblers’.

As I watch the flock, one of the males fans out its tail and puffs up its chest – a pretty impressive sight. It moves near another male, and charges it, preparing to peck. Turkeys have a definite “pecking order” in the flock. The subordinate tom backs away, and the flock resumes feeding. During breeding season in the spring, this kind of displaying and fighting behavior are often seen.

By early fall, the young turkeys are approaching and exceeding the size of adult females. It won’t be long before they separate off into groups of males that become their main social unit for the rest of their lives. Adult males will intermix with females as they feed on concentrated winter foods and during the breeding season, but otherwise they revert back to their “old boys club.”

I often see wild turkeys on my walks. We tend to take their presence for granted, but it has taken a tremendous effort to restore this magnificent bird to our landscape. Turkeys
Eastern Wild Turkey

**DESCRIPTION:**
Largest of North America’s game birds. Gobblers have iridescent black, copper, bronze and gold feathers. Hens have drab, usually brown feathers.

**RANGE:**
North America.

**HABITAT:**
Mature hardwood forest with openings, south-facing slopes with springs and mast-bearing trees, and agricultural lands broken up with forest cover.

**FOOD:**
Mast (acorns and beechnuts), fruits and seeds of trees, shrubs and herbaceous vegetation, tubers, roots and insects.

**REPRODUCTION:**
Nesting takes place in May and early June, with clutch sizes of 12 or so eggs.
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