

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



Male wild turkeys (toms) strut their stuff – puffing out their feathers, spreading their tails and dragging their wings – when displaying for females.

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 sea-

son 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



The long, fleshy flap over the bill on a male is called a snood; Males also have a tuft of stiff hair, the "beard," coming from their chest; Toms' lower legs feature spurs; Hens are much less colorful than toms; Wild turkey chicks are well-camouflaged and ready to move around as soon as they hatch.



were plentiful in southern New Hampshire back in the 1600s when colonists first arrived, ranging over 30 percent of the state. Flocks of 30 to 100 birds were common in those days. As the state was settled, cleared and farmed, many woodlands became too small for turkeys. In addition, unregulated harvest for food and markets took a heavy toll, and turkeys gradually disappeared. It's hard to believe, but before the 1970s, the last wild turkey known in New Hampshire was reported in Weare in 1854.

Things started to change in the 1970s, when, thanks to funding from the federal Wildlife Restoration Program, Fish and Game biologists released 25 wild turkeys in Walpole. The released birds had been trapped and moved here from New York. From that humble beginning, and with 15 additional releases over two decades, New Hampshire's turkey population has grown and flourished; today there are more than 40,000 turkeys statewide!

As the flock I'm watching moves out of view, I know I'll continue to enjoy seeing turkeys all year. In the winter, they'll visit a nearby spring seep, a wet area that doesn't usually freeze and is rarely covered by deep snow, where they can scratch to find leafy vegetation such as ferns, invertebrates and leftover acorns. As the seasons change, they will seek weed seeds, Jack-in-the-pulpit corms, insect larvae and other bugs, as well as grasses, clover, residual acorns and

beechnuts. Come early summer, I will watch for hens with up to twelve young moving slowly across my yard as they eat. I'll never get tired of watching these interesting birds, which are such a great example of how the Wildlife Restoration Program has enriched New Hampshire's wildlife diversity.



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.

Collect Naturalist's Notebook

Readers can collect N.H. wildlife profiles by cutting this page out and collecting them in a notebook. A different species is featured in each issue.

New Hampshire Wildlife Journal is your best source for fishing, hunting, wildlife and conservation information in the state.

DID YOU ENJOY READING THIS ARTICLE?

Every issue of N.H. Wildlife Journal includes stunning wildlife photography, in-depth features and "how-to" articles – plus Naturalist's Notebook, Warden's Watch and no advertising.



So what are you
waiting for?
Subscribe today!

www.wildnh.com/pubs/wj-magazine.html