

Wild Turkeys of New Mexico



Merriam's

THE OTHER NATIONAL BIRD

According to Benjamin Franklin, the wild turkey was “more respectable than the eagle and a true American native.” Although the bald eagle already had been chosen years before as the national symbol, Franklin’s sentiment continues to be shared by many naturalists and hunters who know the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) to be a beautiful wildlife species. Once rare and nearly extirpated across much of the United States, New Mexico currently enjoys a healthy population of wild turkeys that roam the river corridors and mountainous terrain found throughout the state.

Three subspecies of wild turkey live in New Mexico. The Merriam’s turkey, predominantly a mountain and coniferous forest species, has the widest distribution and is the most numerous turkey subspecies in the state. The Rio Grande turkey can be found along watercourses in central and northeastern New Mexico. The rare Gould’s or Mexican turkey is found in the extreme southwestern corner of the state. The Gould’s turkey is considered an endangered species in the United States and may not be hunted, though larger populations are found south of the border in Mexico.

The three subspecies can be readily distinguished by the coloration of their tail feathers. The Merriam’s has an ashy-white tail band, the Rio Grande a darker, chocolate-brown

band, and the Gould’s an almost pure white band on its tail. The breast and neck of all the subspecies have a bronze sheen, while their backs are mostly black. Wing feathers are barred with white and brown. Females or hens are generally lighter colored than the males, that are called gobblers or toms. Toms also sport red, white and blue coloration on their nearly featherless heads. Beards, the hair-like feather clusters that protrude from a male’s breast, often are used to distinguish the sexes although this is not a reliable characteristic due to the fact that females also can grow beards. Hens average 8 to 10 pounds, while fully-grown toms average 17 to 21 pounds.

CULTURAL IMPORTANCE

Even before the arrival of Spanish explorers in the mid 1500s, wild turkeys were highly valued by New Mexico’s Native Americans. Ancient turkey bones have been found in caves and streambeds used by American Indians throughout the Southwest. There is archaeological evidence that the Anasazi and other Indian cultures in New Mexico and the Southwest traded for domesticated turkeys from Mexico and Central America. These domesticated turkeys are possibly the forerunners of today’s Merriam’s wild turkey who escaped domestication and likely became feral (wild) long before the first Spanish colonists arrived.

Turkeys were used by the Indians as food and as a supply of feathers for clothing, blankets and arrow fletching.

Bones and spurs were used to make awls, beads, spoons and arrow points. In later years, the Spanish, Mexican and Anglo settlers of New Mexico hunted the wild turkey to supplement a sometimes sparse food supply. The Hopi Indians of Arizona and other tribes in New Mexico still



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Benjamin Franklin



Rio Grande



Rio Grande

use turkey feathers to decorate prayer sticks or other ceremonial items.

Today, wild turkeys are a popular game species for hunters and a welcome sight to birders, hikers and others who spend time in turkey country.

LIFE HISTORY

Wild turkeys put on a spectacular show during their yearly mating season. Each spring, the male turkey presents a brilliant display of color, sound and movement to establish territory and attract females. The red, white and blue coloring of the male's head intensifies during this period. The tom spreads his tail feathers in an upright fan, droops his wing tips to the ground and performs a strutting dance to attract the attention of the surrounding hens. The toms also produce a deep-throated "gobbling" sound, which is why they are so often referred to as gobblers.

After mating in March or April, the hens make their shallow nests on the ground and lay nine to

twelve eggs. Because the hens do not initially protect the eggs, freezing or wet weather in late spring can kill many young before they are hatched. Hens begin to incubate the eggs in mid to late May and, after approximately 28 days, the young poults hatch. Hens and their broods often join together in groups to forage for insects, berries, grasses and other food items. These large groups roost and forage together throughout the winter until the adult hens leave in spring to nest.

Turkeys eat a variety of foods throughout the year, including pine and pinon nuts, acorns, berries, grass, insects and fruits. Foods, such as juniper berries and tall grasses that protrude above the snow, carry turkeys through winter in many parts of New Mexico. The birds typically forage and roost at lower elevations during the winter. Harsh weather and predators can take a large toll on turkey populations. Coyotes, bobcats, bears, skunks, and raccoons all prey on turkeys and young poults often fall prey to hawks and owls in the first few weeks of their life.

MANAGEMENT

Wild turkey management has come a long way since the days of the turkey's near extinction in the



Rio Grande

early 1900s. Turkey populations today are stable or increasing across most of the United States, including New Mexico. This success is due to the concerted efforts of sportsmen, conservationists and state and federal wildlife management agencies. Although early efforts to stock pen-raised turkeys failed due to disease and inbreeding, trapping and transplanting wild turkeys has proven successful. The Department's long-range management plan focuses on trapping wild turkeys from areas with large, healthy populations and then relocating them to areas with smaller populations or areas where turkeys were previously extirpated. Most recently, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has worked with conservation organizations, hunters, naturalists and private landowners to transplant Rio Grande turkeys along portions of the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico. Merriam's turkeys also have been transplanted from northeastern New

Mexico to areas in the southwest corner of the state that provide good habitat but have few resident turkeys.

Habitat improvements are another tool that wildlife managers have used successfully in New Mexico and elsewhere. Habitat management strategies to increase turkey food production, vegetative cover and water availability have helped to boost populations of wild turkeys throughout the state. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish's long-range turkey management plan will help the Department more effectively to perpetuate turkey populations and habitat throughout the State. By coordinating wildlife management tools to promote turkey populations, the Department and concerned citizens have made the wild turkey one of the great success stories of wildlife management in New Mexico.



Merriam's

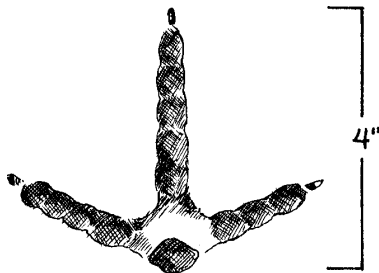


All photos by Don MacCarter



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TURKEY TRACK

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