



WILDLIFE NOTES

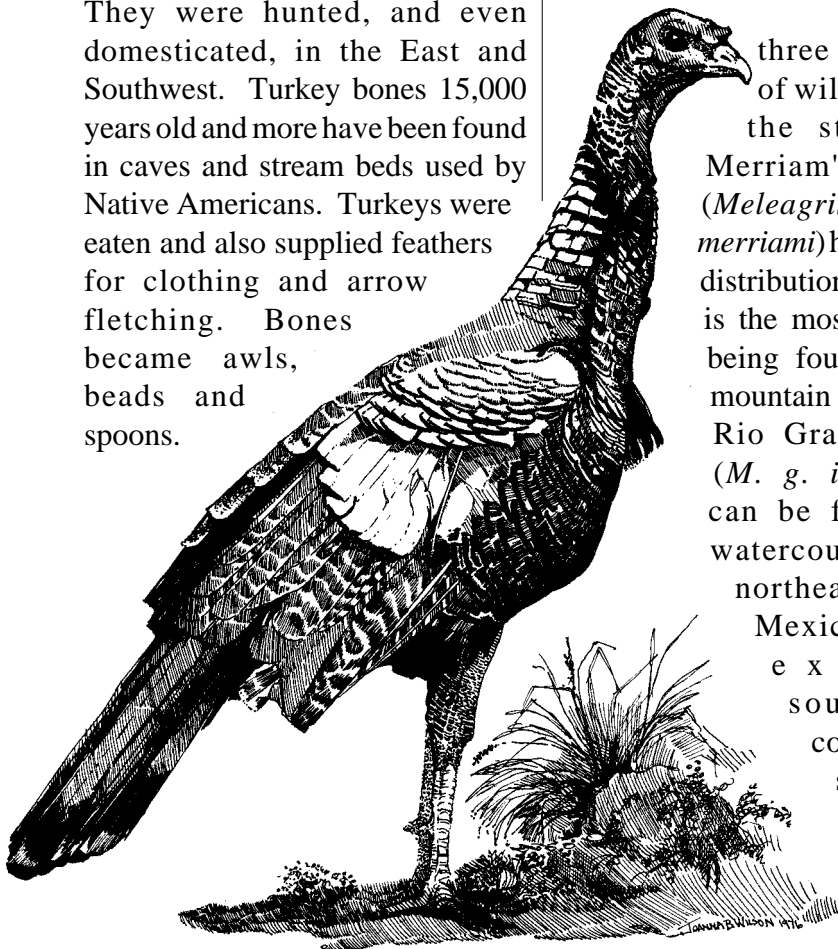
Wild turkey

Ben Franklin wanted to make the wild turkey the national bird, and even today some people wish he had succeeded. Stately birds in the forest – and Thanksgiving Day symbols at the home – wild turkeys are the largest game birds in America. They are found in many mountainous areas of New Mexico, and their recorded history here goes back to the 1540 expedition of Coronado.

Before that, turkeys were important to Native Americans. They were hunted, and even domesticated, in the East and Southwest. Turkey bones 15,000 years old and more have been found in caves and stream beds used by Native Americans. Turkeys were eaten and also supplied feathers for clothing and arrow fletching. Bones became awls, beads and spoons.

When miners and settlers came into New Mexico in the 1800s, they started to kill turkeys effectively. Wagonloads were hauled to market.

Turkeys were eliminated from many mountain ranges, and their populations depleted in other areas. The ebb was around 1924, and efforts of the Department of Game and Fish began to turn the numbers around by 1930. Birds were live-trapped and moved to other areas. Most suitable mountain ranges now contain wild turkeys.



There are three subspecies of wild turkeys in the state. The Merriam's turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo merriami*) has the widest distribution by far, and is the most numerous, being found in many mountain areas. The Rio Grande turkey (*M. g. intermedia*) can be found along watercourses in northeastern New Mexico. In the extreme southwestern corner of the state, the Mexican or Gould's turkey

(*M. g. mexicana*) is found. It is considered threatened here and may not be hunted, though larger populations are found in Mexico.

Adult toms (males) weigh close to 16 pounds on the average, and hens seldom exceed 12 pounds. Tail coloration distinguishes the three subspecies. The Merriam's has an ashy-white tail band, the Rio Grande a rich chocolate band, and the Mexican a pure white band. Turkeys have a brilliant bronze sheen on the breast and neck, while their backs are a velvety black. Wing feathers have white and brown bars. Females are generally lighter than males.

In the spring mating season, the colors and behavior of the toms are spectacular. A male's head and upper neck are bare of feathers. The loose folds of skin (or wattles) become brilliantly colored from deep red to bright blue. When a tom displays for females, he spreads his tail feathers in an upright fan, droops his wingtips to the ground, and performs a strutting dance, pausing for deep-throated gobbling. Toms gobble to establish territories and attract as many females as they can. The male has a beard – hairlike feathers that hang from the breast. Beards may reach 10 inches in length. Hens occasionally have beards.

Turkeys may live longer than five years in the wild, but average

life expectancy is close to two years. Life in the wild takes its toll on young turkeys (poults). After mating in March and April, females make their nests, usually shallow depressions in pine needles and grass. Hens lay from nine to 12 eggs over a period of two to three weeks. The hen does not protect the eggs during this time, and freezing weather in late spring can kill many of the eggs.

Nests are usually at the base of a tree and have deadfall or blown-down wood. There is usually a long, narrow opening where hens lead poults after they hatch. Here they find insects that comprise their diet for the first few months. These openings are called brood lanes. The average distance from water to a nest is a third of a mile. About 35 percent of mature hens are successful in producing eggs.

Most hens begin incubating their

eggs by late May. After an incubation of about 28 days, poults hatch and are soon able to forage for food with their mother. She often joins up with two or three other hens, and they raise their families together. Young turkeys grow rapidly, and as soon as they are able, they roost in trees at night, where they are much safer than on the ground. Roost trees, usually mature ponderosa pines, are tall and have horizontal branches. They are used over and over, and may sometimes be recognized by accumulated droppings. By late September, poults are nearly the size of hens. Large groups of hens and poults stay together in the winter, and young birds become completely independent only when hens leave them to start the breeding cycle again.

Turkeys eat a variety of foods, including pine and pinon nuts and other mast in the winter, and berries,

grass, insects, and fruits when available. Green vegetation is important in their diet in the spring. In the wintertime, juniper berries and tall grass are usually available to turkeys. The birds move to lower elevations to escape severe winter in higher elevations.

Predators take a large toll on turkey populations, with bobcats and coyotes being the most efficient in late winter and early spring. Other predators include skunks, bears, and raccoons. Poults are susceptible to predation by hawks and owls for the first few weeks. At 12 to 15 days old they can also die of overexposure if they are wet and cold. Feathers develop later on that reduce this danger.

Hunters and photographers alike can learn more about wild turkeys by studying their habits and learning to imitate their calls.

