



Wild Turkey

Ecology & Damage Management

The Eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is a large, native game bird found primarily in the Eastern United States, although some Western states have successfully reintroduced Eastern wild turkeys. In Wisconsin, turkeys are found in all counties, but they are most common in the lower two-thirds of the state.

The Eastern wild turkey was considered absent from the state from the late 1800s through the 1950s as a result of unregulated harvest, habitat loss, and disease. However, as a result of successful reintroduction efforts beginning in 1976, and the preservation of quality habitat, turkeys are again thriving. The growing population has not been without conflict. Wild turkeys have been known to become aggressive toward humans and cause damage to buildings. Turkey damage to agricultural crops, both growing and stored, has also been documented across the state.



DESCRIPTION

The Eastern wild turkey is an easily identified, large bird most commonly seen on the ground. Adult males, known as toms, and females, called hens, can be distinguished primarily by size. Adult males can be as large as 25 pounds and adult females typically weigh around 10 pounds.

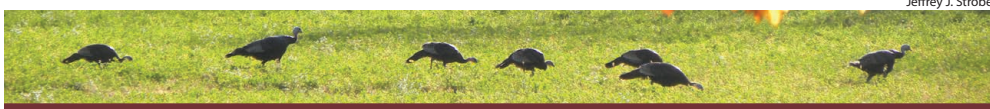
The male turkey's back is covered in shiny bronze feathers. Its breast has black feathers and the wings and tail have alternating light and dark bands. Clumps of long, coarse feathers, looking much like a beard, hang from the chest, and a relatively sharp spur can be found on the back of each leg. Its head is blue-gray and featherless, and it has a reddish wattle at the throat.

During the breeding season, the male turkeys' coloring becomes much more vivid: their foreheads turn white, their faces turn bright blue, their necks turn a scarlet

red. They also begin a very conspicuous courtship display, which includes puffing up their feathers and fanning their tails.

Immature male turkeys are called jakes. Jakes and toms can be told apart by their tail feathers. Tail feathers of toms are all the same length, while jakes' tail feathers are longer in the center of the tail. Jakes also tend to have much shorter beards and smaller spurs than do toms.

Besides being much smaller, female turkeys are duller in color overall than the males. Their feathers are brown, and their heads are blue-gray with a few sparse feathers. They have no wattles. A small number of females may have beards and spurs, although beards are typically thinner and shorter than male beards, and the spurs are rounded and less developed than male spurs.



Jeffrey J. Strobel

HABITS AND HABITAT

Turkeys are opportunistic feeders, feasting in spring and summer on grass, seeds, berries, insects and even frogs and lizards. In the fall and winter turkeys eat acorns, other nuts, seeds and grains. Turkeys are generalists, using a wide variety of habitats, but they tend to be most abundant where forested and open habitats are about equally available on the landscape. During the day they are commonly found in crop fields, forests and suburban environments. The diversity of these habitats provides year-round food sources.

Woodland edges, especially those found near livestock farms, provide prime habitat due to the availability of waste grain and relative safety of the nearby forest.

REPRODUCTION

Reproduction is polygamous, with one male courting several females. Males perform visual displays, fanning their tails, strutting, and gobbling (a type of vocalization) in an attempt to attract females. Females lay 4-17 yellow-white eggs in ground nests scratched a few inches into the soil. Nests are usually located in dense understory

At night, turkeys roost in dense thickets of tall trees, which provide protection from weather and predators. In northern Wisconsin, this typically means roosting in large conifers, or “evergreen” trees, while in southern Wisconsin they are more commonly found in mature stands of deciduous trees.

Turkeys are social creatures and form flocks in fall based on sex and age classes: hens with their young (called poults), hens without poults, jakes and adult gobblers. These gregarious birds live in groups, with the largest (often single-sex) groups forming during the winter. The foraging of these large groups can create a nuisance in a concentrated area.

vegetation to provide insulation and camouflage. Eggs hatch in 28 days. Only about 25 percent of nests will successfully produce live young. After hatching, the poults are very mobile, but a female will stay with them where there is plentiful food and nearby cover for rearing her young.

IDENTIFYING TURKEY DAMAGE

In Wisconsin, large groups of turkeys can often be seen feeding in agricultural fields during the nonbreeding season and occupying other areas (e.g., suburbia). Even if the birds are not actually seen, their “scratches” and distinctive footprints will give them away. A scratch is a small area of ground scraped by the turkey in its search for food. The scratches will often contain turkey tracks or scattered small holes made by the turkey’s beak. A turkey footprint shows the impression of three long toes pointing forward from a relatively small footpad. Sometimes there will be a fourth toe print pointing directly backward from the middle toe. In addition to tracks, turkey droppings (scat) and feathers are clues to look for when confirming the presence of turkeys. However, the appearance of turkey scat varies with the birds’ changing diet, sometimes making it an unreliable identifier.

Roosting

The turkeys’ ability to adapt to urban and suburban areas opens up avenues for turkey-human interactions. A common reason for conflict is the birds’ need for roosting sites. Turkeys can be found roosting on buildings, homes, and even vehicles in human-dominated areas. Due to their large size and strength, this

may result in damage to personal property, especially vehicles. Roosting sites also sport a large accumulation of turkey droppings.

Aggressiveness

Close proximity to humans can sometimes provoke unwanted, even aggressive behavior in wild turkeys. In areas where they have become accustomed to people, they perceive human beings to be part of the “flock” and, therefore, the pecking order. Turkeys will act passive or fearful if they view a human as dominant. Viewed as a subordinate, a human might be “bullied.” The turkey may charge at the person, chase them, or even attempt to attack by flapping its wings, pecking, or spurring. Humans seen as “male” may be challenged by adult males or followed by hens, especially in spring. Humans seen as “female” could be displayed to or followed by toms. An aggressive tom may also attack an item in which he can see his reflection, believing it to be another competing male. This can mean scratches and dents to cars, especially ones with shiny, reflective chrome bumpers. It may also result in damage to windows or window screens. In areas with hybrid wild/domestic



Turkey tracks

turkey populations these encounters may be more common because hybrid turkeys are not as fearful of humans as are their wild counterparts.

Crop Damage

The most common agricultural damage caused by turkeys is to ginseng and stored silage. Turkeys will scratch through hay (looking for insects) that is used to provide thermal protection to the ginseng root during cold temperatures. As turkeys scratch the hay off the root, the ginseng freezes and dies. This can occur in other freshly bedded crops as well. Turkeys may damage stored silage by pecking



Hen turkey with poults.

holes in silage bags or entering bunker silos and eating the silage and defecating in the cattle feed. This is most often observed in winter when corn

and waste grains are a larger part of their diet.

Turkeys, especially in large flocks, are often mistakenly blamed for crop damage during the growing season. Research conducted in Wisconsin indicated that turkeys were actually responsible for 18 percent of the reported crop damage incidents with the other incidents due to raccoon and deer. Insects are the main part of a turkey's diet this time of year, and the birds often forage for them in crop fields. Research shows turkey damage to corn crops during the growing season is minimal. Although major agricultural damage from turkeys is not widespread, it can occur in certain circumstances and result in economic loss. Turkeys are one of the species listed in Wisconsin's Damage Abatement and Claims Program (WDACP). This program provides assistance in minimizing and preventing turkey damage, as well as partial compensation for crop losses. More information about the WDACP can be found by contacting your local Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources office.

LEGAL STATUS

The Eastern wild turkey is a protected species in Wisconsin. It may only be killed with a valid hunting license and permit during designated hunting seasons

or with a special nuisance permit issued by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). There is no federal protection of this species.

CONTROLLING TURKEY DAMAGE

NONLETHAL CONTROL

Harassment

There are several nonlethal options for managing nuisance turkeys. It is legal to harass turkeys as long as the turkeys are not being physically harmed. Turkeys are particularly adept at noticing their surroundings and remembering what their environments look like. In urban and suburban areas the simplest solution for keeping turkeys away is to place unusual objects in your yard. Objects should be moved around and changed frequently so the turkeys do not become used to them. Sticks with strands of reflective Mylar® tied to them can be placed around the yard to frighten the turkeys. Sticks should be placed at a slight angle so the Mylar® is moving even with the slightest air current. Motion-detecting sprinklers, noisemaking devices (e.g., propane cannons, loud radio) and scarecrows have also been shown to discourage turkeys. If you use noisemaking devices, please make sure it is legal within your municipality and be considerate of neighbors.

Exclusion

Bird spikes that are used to discourage crows and pigeons from roosting may also be used to keep turkeys off your

house or other roosting sites. Turkeys are capable of flight but prefer to stay on the ground. Fencing can usually keep most nuisance turkeys out of an area, but fences are most effective when protecting a small area such as a garden. If the fenced-in area is large enough, turkeys will often fly over the fence, attracted by the abundant habitat on the other side.

Repellent

Methyl anthranilate, a nontoxic, biodegradable food ingredient, can be sprayed on crops, grass or other areas to keep birds away. This repellent will repel numerous bird species. Birds find it highly irritating, but to humans it simply smells like grapes. It can commonly be bought under the name Rejex-it.® The product must be sprayed often to have a lasting effect. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources does not require a permit for individuals using this or a similar product.

Cultural Modification

Keeping a well-cut lawn will minimize seed production and, thus, insect populations, making your yard a less attractive food source. Remove any attractants, like birdseed, that may be causing turkeys to come onto your property.

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This fact sheet is part of a series designed to help you successfully manage wildlife damage problems on your property. The series includes additional publications which focus on controlling damage from specific animals, plus an introduction to wildlife damage management.

LETHAL CONTROL

Regulated hunting seasons are the most used form of lethal control. Hunting regulations and limits are established using population estimates in order to sustain a viable population while allowing for hunting opportunities and minimizing damage caused by turkeys.

Turkeys may only be hunted by individuals possessing a valid turkey hunting license, turkey stamp and permit during the state's turkey hunting seasons. Consult your local or state hunting laws for further information. In circumstances where turkeys are causing agricultural

damage, a nuisance, or a human health and safety concern, the WDNR may issue agricultural damage or nuisance turkey shooting permits that allow landowners or property managers to remove turkeys during or outside the state's turkey hunting seasons. Individuals assisting the landowner or property managers in removing turkeys under an agriculture damage or nuisance turkey shooting permit must possess a valid turkey hunting license and turkey stamp or small game hunting license and turkey stamp.

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