

Wild Turkey

Scientific Name: *Meleagris gallopavo*



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Introduction

The wild turkey has returned to the Ohio landscape after many years of absence. This bird once inhabited forested areas of the entire state, providing food and sport for Native Americans and early Ohio settlers. As settlement continued and forest lands were converted to cropland, the wild turkey's population dwindled to the point that no birds remained in the state by 1904.

As large tracts of land reverted to forested areas, the ODNR Division of Wildlife began a nearly 40-year effort to reestablish the wild turkey in the state. Early efforts, using game farm reared birds that were then released into the wild failed. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, wild turkeys were trapped in states with established populations and transplanted into Ohio forests. This approach was a success. As these birds developed populations throughout southeast Ohio, Division biologists began trapping birds and transplanting them to other counties in the state. Today there are wild turkeys in 80 of Ohio's 88 counties.

Description

The wild turkey is Ohio's largest upland gamebird, standing three to four feet tall and weighing up to 24 pounds. It has a slim build, long neck, and nearly featherless head. The body feathers appear drab brown at a distance, but are actually iridescent when the bird appears in good light; this iridescence gives the bird its true coloration--bronze with hints of red, green, copper, and gold. The large tail is brown with a black band at the tip. Adult males (gobblers)

have a reddish head, a long, tasseled "beard" that dangles from the breast, black-tipped breast feathers, and spurs on the legs. Female (hen) turkeys, have a bluish head, usually no beard, buff-tipped breast feathers, and no spurs.

An adult male turkey will weigh between 17 and 21 pounds; females are slightly smaller at 8 to 11 pounds. Gobblers stand about 40 inches tall; females 30 inches.

Habitat and Habits

Wild turkeys are very adaptable animals. Although they prefer mature forests, with substantial cover and suitable food sources, they can live successfully in areas with as little as 15 percent forest cover. The feeding area should include a mix of forbs, grasses, and insects. There are limited numbers of areas that meet this criteria in the state. Efforts have been made to develop habitat on public land through timber and watershed management.

The wild turkeys will eat a variety of foods; 90 percent of their diet is plant material and the remaining 10 percent animal. Among the primary sources of its diet are: green plants; grass leaves and seed; greenbrier leaves and fruit; Jack-in-the-pulpit leaves, flowers, and tubers; the fruits of flowering dogwoods, black gum, wild grape, wild cherry, and hackberry; acorns; and various wildflower and weed leaves and seeds.

Wild turkeys make a variety of sounds, including a male's gobble, the hen's yelp, a poult's peep, an alarm call that sounds like

“putt,” and an assortment of purrs, trills, croaks, whines, and barks. The best known of these vocalizations is the gobble.

Reproduction and Care of the Young

April marks the beginning of one of Ohio’s most colorful wildlife mating rituals. Male wild turkeys begin gobbling to attract the attention of female turkeys. Receptive hens seek out gobbling males and then a courtship display begins. The gobbler spreads his wing feathers and lowers his wings to the ground, fans his tail into an upright position, and erects the feathers on his breast, back, and flanks, all the while strutting slowly around the hen. The display continues, growing in intensity until the birds breed. Wild turkeys are polygamous and following breeding the male will go on to breed other females. Hen turkeys rear their young (poults) on their own.

Turkey nests are most often in dense cover near an open area, and are made in a small depression in the ground and lined with leaves. Hens lay an average of 12 eggs. The hen incubates the eggs for about a month. About 6 to 12 hours after they hatch, poults are able to walk; within about a day they can run and are able to peck at insects. The hen will lead the young poults to open areas for several weeks to feed. Turkeys usually feed in flocks of family units or groups of adults, scratching through leaf litter for insects, fruits, and acorns. Occasionally they will feed in a vine or tree. Most wild turkey broods will remain together for four or five months. Young females may stay with the hen until the following spring at the start of breeding season.

Management Plans

The ODNR Division of Wildlife monitors the distribution and abundance of wild turkeys in Ohio using three annual surveys: spring gobbling counts, spring turkey hunting harvest figures, and cooperative turkey observation reports. Gobbling counts involve biologists and/or volunteers going out to count the number of gobblers they hear at predetermined sites in 51 counties. The number of gobblers heard per 100 stops is compared to the figures from earlier years to measure changes in the population. The spring turkey harvest figures help biologists determine the presence and distribution of turkeys in counties open to hunting as well as an estimate of the number of turkeys in the county. The harvest figures also help us evaluate the success of stocking efforts, effectiveness of hunting regulations, and provide the basis for future hunting recommendations. Cooperative turkey observations are the records of wild turkeys sighted by hunters when they were out on

other hunting trips. This information is also used to evaluate our stocking efforts and population distribution.

In the summer months--June, July, and August-- observations of hens with their young are made to provide a record of reproductive success. Every five years the Division updates its records of the areas wild turkeys occupy in the state. This is just another way to evaluate the success of stocking and to identify areas with suitable habitat, but without turkeys.

Viewing Opportunities

The wild turkey is quite elusive. Chances are you may hear it before or rather than seeing it. But to increase your odds you might want to plan a trip to one of these designated “Watchable Wildlife” areas: Woodbury, Salt Fork, Waterloo, and Cooper Hollow wildlife areas, Wayne National Forest, Hocking and Shawnee state forests, and Paint Creek State Park.

Do Something Wild!

The ODNR Division of Wildlife manages for wildlife diversity in the state. We attempt to create or conserve the habitats that will support as wide a variety of wildlife as possible. Many species like the wild turkey are hunted in the state, but many more are not. The Division has a special program to manage and research non-game species that is supported by the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money either donated through the state income tax checkoff, by the purchase of wildlife license plates, or direct contributions to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat that is essential to sustaining many species of wildlife and to implement special efforts like the reintroduction of the osprey and the trumpeter swan to the state.

Contributions to our Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, ODNR Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return, or directly, are tax deductible.

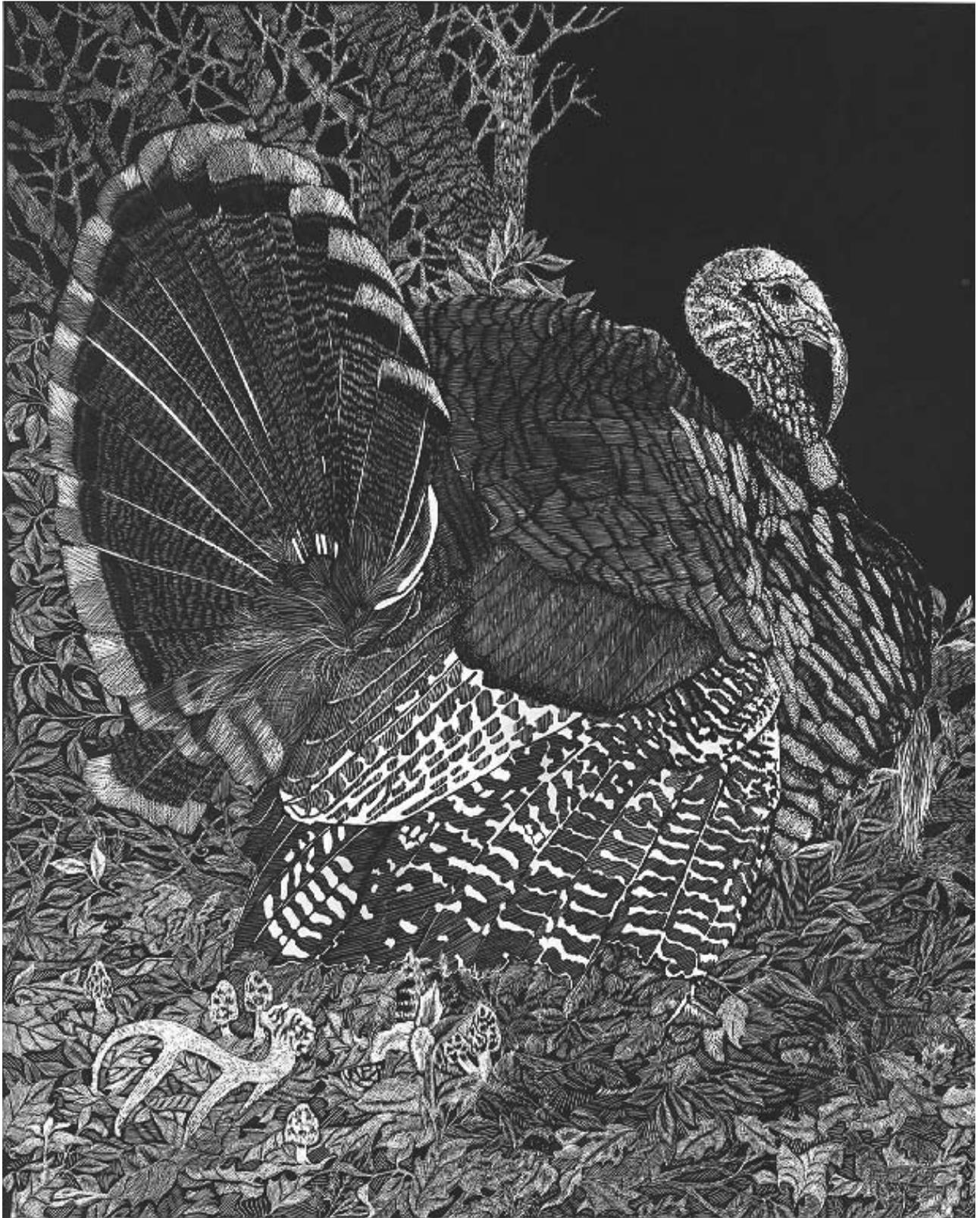
At a Glance

Mating: Polygamous, males breed with more than one female

Peak Breeding Activity: In April

Nesting Period: Mid-April through mid-June; peak hatch mid-May through June

Incubation: 28 days



Young: Precocial (eyes are open and young can move about shortly after hatching); first flight at about 2 weeks

Clutch Size: 8-16 eggs; 12 is average

Number of Broods per Year: 1; may renest if the first nest is lost early in incubation

Adult Weight: Males 8-24 pounds, average 17; females 7-16 pounds, average 11

Adult Wingspan: Males 42-48 inches; females 34-39 inches

Life Expectancy: Males just over 2 years; females just over 3 years

Migration Pattern: Year-round resident; has a home range of about 2 square miles

Typical Foods: Acorns, beechnuts, fruits of dogwood, grape, greenbriar, and many other shrubs; insects, leaves and fruits of many green plants

Native to Ohio: Yes



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