



Eastern Wild Turkey

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



NWTF

Eastern Wild Turkey

(*Meleagris gallopavo*)

Wild turkeys were important both to Native Americans and early Europeans in America. For Plains and Eastern Indians, turkeys were an important food source and provided feathers for head dressings and arrows. Indians also used turkey spurs to make arrow points and other sharp utensils. Early Europeans used wild turkeys as a food source. However, historians are unsure if wild turkeys were served to the Pilgrims on our country's first Thanksgiving.

Two species of wild turkeys are found in North America: *Meleagris gallopavo* and *Meleagris ocellata* (the Ocellated Turkey). Only *M. gallopavo* is found in the United States, and the Eastern Wild Turkey is the only subspecies found in North Carolina.

Description

The male Eastern Wild Turkey has dark plumage with striking bronze, copper and green iridescent colors. On their legs, males have pointed growths called spurs that they use when battling other males for mates. Males also have a growth of bristle-like filaments known as the "beard" that extends from the breast. About 5% of females also have beards. The head and neck of adult males is largely bare and varies in color from red to blue to white, depending on the bird's mood. Females are usually duller in color than males, which helps camouflage them while they are nesting.

History and Status

When early European settlers arrived in North Carolina, turkeys were plentiful and found throughout the entire state. By the middle of the 20th century, however, few turkeys remained. The decline was primarily due to unregulated and heavy market hunting, rapid deforestation and habitat destruction throughout the state. This decline continued through the 1960s. Turkeys are once again common in North Carolina, thanks to a restoration program implemented by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission that involved live-trapping and relocating wild turkeys from sites in North Carolina and other states to areas in the state where turkeys had previously disappeared. From the 1950s through 2005, over 6,000 wild turkeys were trapped and relocated to 358 release sites across the state. Closing the fall turkey hunting season also helped wild turkey populations recover. North Carolina's population increased from 2,000 birds in 1970 to 265,000 in 2015.

For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit www.ncwildlife.org/turkey.

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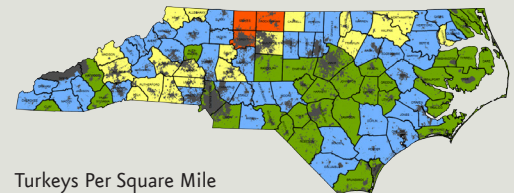


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Range and Distribution

The wild turkey is found in 49 of the 50 United States, in Mexico, and in parts of Canada. Only Alaska has no wild turkeys. North Carolina's turkey restoration program was a monumental success, and turkeys are now found in all 100 counties of North Carolina, from the mountains to the coast.

2015 North Carolina Wild Turkey Density Map



Turkeys Per Square Mile

- less than 5
- 5-9
- 10-14
- 15 or more

No Density Estimate

Where harvest data are not available to produce density estimates because hunting is limited or prohibited; includes federal and state parks, municipal boundaries, water bodies and human density greater than 1 person per 2 acres.

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Habitats & Habits

The Eastern Wild Turkey thrives best in areas with a mix of forested and open land habitats. Forested areas are used for cover, foraging, and for roosting in trees at night. Open land areas are used for foraging, mating, and brood rearing. Turkeys nest on the ground, laying clutches of 10-14 eggs in April and May in North Carolina. Turkeys are very vocal birds, and they communicate through a variety of calls. During the spring mating season, males use their booming gobble to attract hens.

Turkeys primarily rely on their eyesight and hearing for protection from predators. Their excellent eyesight is their best defense during the daytime, but they don't see well at night. Turkeys have little or no sense of smell. Turkeys are highly mobile and can run up to 25 mph and fly up to 55 mph.

Human Interactions

The Eastern Wild Turkey remains a favorite game animal for recreational hunters. Although commercial and unregulated hunting were problems in the past, hunters were the main group that helped restore turkey populations by funding restocking and relocations programs and contributing to groups that conserve habitat such as the National Wild Turkey Federation.

Eastern Wild Turkeys are a game species in North Carolina, with a hunting season that begins in April. Only male or bearded birds can be harvested, and baiting is prohibited. It is illegal to release pen-raised turkeys in the wild because of the danger of introducing diseases to healthy wild birds.

NCWRC Spotlight

A gobbling chronology study is currently underway to determine if the hunting season is timed appropriately. In addition, a wild turkey brood survey is conducted each summer to gain insight into wild turkey productivity across the state and to evaluate gobbler harvest levels from the previous spring hunting season. Participation in the survey involves keeping track of wild turkey observations during the course of routine, daily activities from July 1 through August 31. More information can be found at www.ncwildlife.org/turkey.

For More Information

- Dickson, J. G. 1992. *The Wild Turkey: Biology and Management*. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, USA.
- Hewitt, O.H., editor. 1967. *The Wild Turkey and its Management*. The Wildlife Society, Washington Depot, Connecticut, USA.
- Seamster, M. H. (Edited by E. Stanford and C. Kreh) 2016. *A History of Wild Turkey Management in North Carolina*. North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Raleigh, USA. <http://www.ncwildlife.org/Portals/0/Hunting/Documents/History_Wild_Turkey_Management.pdf>. Accessed 5 July 2017.

Credits

Written by Brad Howard, Chris Kreh, and Evin Stanford, NCWRC. Updated 2017.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Galliformes

Average Size

Length: about 3-4 ft.

Wingspread: 4-5 ft.

Weight (Adults): Female 10 lbs; male 20 lbs.

Food

Wild turkeys are omnivorous, feeding primarily on nuts, berries, acorns, grasses, seeds and insects. They will also eat lizards and grubs.

Breeding/Young

Males are called gobblers or toms; females are called hens. Males attract females by gobbling and strutting.

Very young turkeys are called poults.

Juvenile females are called jennies; juvenile males are jakes.

Wild turkeys lay eggs beginning in April. Average clutch size is about 10-14 eggs. Females will lay one clutch per year, and will re-nest if the first clutch fails. Young are sexually mature in one year.

Life Expectancy

Two years, although some birds have lived up to 10 years.



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