

## Catch a glimpse of these turkeys gone wild

- Rob Lee

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They seem to be everywhere these days. You've probably seen them, too, running across the road, ambling through the oak savanna.

My wife and I were out early one morning this spring. We looked across a meadow of new grasses, purple lupine and yellow buttercup, and there he was; puffed up big as a Mack truck, tail feathers fanned, a strutting tom turkey with two rather disinterested looking hens.

He was magnificent, marching back and forth rattling his low-slung wing feathers, iridescent green glowing from the deep brown of his breast plumage. I was struck by how beautiful his tail was; perfectly fanned with concentric circles of buff and shades of brown. His naked head was blue and red.

The two hens looked long and slender by comparison, as they nibbled at grasses, their backs to him. Domestic turkeys are notoriously stupid, but their wild ancestors are known for their wariness, although some Indians considered them stupid and cowardly and didn't eat them for fear of gaining those characteristics.

Watching this male strut I couldn't help but wonder if his exaggerated self-importance prompted this reputation. In late winter or very early spring, dominant toms begin gobbling, starting when they awake on their roost. Their gobbling can be heard for more than a mile. Sexually mature and receptive hens will mate with them immediately. As the breeding season warms into spring, the flocks of hens break into smaller groups and disperse widely into their range looking for good nesting sites.

### Turkey style

The toms follow gobbling, strutting and gathering the hens into harems. Mating activity now decreases until the hens depart for their nests. Hens scratch out a depression, often near the base of a tree or a log, which they line with leaves and grass. They lay 10 to 12 eggs, one a day. Spreading leaves over their backs for camouflage while they incubate, they slip out from under the leaves when they get up from the nest, so the leaves hide the eggs.

The hatched chicks (or poults) soon depart from the nest, feeding themselves, mostly on insects. The hen broods the poults for several weeks until they are able to fly up into a tree to roost with the other turkeys. Poults double their weight each week for their first month. (As the large eggs take six weeks to lay and then incubate, and the poults are earthbound for their first two weeks, they are very attractive to predators: Their mortality rate is 70 to 80 percent or higher.)

The male poults stay with their mothers for a year, leaving when they are sexually mature, while the females disperse more widely, in anticipation of their first nesting season. Later in our walk that day, we saw two young males (jakes) foraging together. They were probably brothers, and very possibly the offspring of one of the hens we had seen earlier. Just as these two jakes were together, un-nested females flock together, as do nested females and then the guys, the gobblers.

Yes, these birds do fly

Wild turkeys are strong, fast fliers for short distances (they've been clocked at 55 mph), but most of their 5- to 12-year life is spent walking or running. Acorns are a staple, but they eat a wide variety of seeds, tubers, berries, fruits and insects, along with the occasional small amphibian and reptile.

Hunted to alarmingly low numbers in the 19th century, turkeys are one of the success stories of 20th century conservation, both in hunting regulation and land-management practices. They have recovered, or been introduced, across their historical range, from the Southwest across and up into New England, and have been introduced into areas outside their original range.

Other members of their family haven't been so lucky. Several grouse species are endangered, mostly by land-use practices (grazing and logging in particular). The heath hen of the Pine Barrens habitats of New Jersey to Massachusetts was last seen in 1931.

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