



Living With Wildlife

Wild Turkey in Massachusetts



Photo © by Bill Byrne

At the time of colonial settlement, the wild turkey was widespread in Massachusetts. As settlement progressed, hardwood forests were cut and the range of the turkey began to shrink. The last known native bird was killed in 1851. After the Civil War, land use patterns began to change. Farms were abandoned and the forests regenerated. After several unsuccessful attempts at restoring turkeys, MassWildlife managers learned that trapping and relocating wild birds was a successful restoration strategy in other parts of the country. Biologists captured 37 birds in New York and released them in southern Berkshire County between 1972 and 1973. The new flock grew, and by the fall of 1978 the estimated population was about 1,000 birds. With birds also moving in from adjacent states, turkeys soon ranged throughout most parts of Massachusetts west of the Connecticut River. In-state transplants of the birds, conducted until 1996, continued to expand the range of the bird into the central, northeastern and southeastern parts of the state. The estimated population now exceeds 18,000 birds! In the 1990s, the wild turkey was named the state's official game bird. Under careful management, the future looks bright for turkeys; sportsmen, naturalists and other wildlife enthusiasts welcome their return.

Description: The wild turkey is a strikingly handsome bird. Black to blackish-bronze with white wing bars, blackish-brown tail feathers and a bluish-gray to red head, "toms" or male wild turkeys weigh about 16 to 24 pounds. They sport a hair-like "beard" which protrudes from the breast bone. When a tom is strutting, its head turns a bright red. Females, called hens, are smaller - about 9 to 12 pounds.

Life History: Turkeys are active during the day, roosting at night to avoid predators. In residential areas, it is not uncommon for turkeys to roost on railings, roofs, or sometimes on vehicles. Gobbling, during breeding season, usually starts around mid-March, peaking in early May. This is when the males puff out their feathers, fan their tails and "strut their stuff." Hens lay eggs after the first mating. The nest is a shallow, leaf-lined depression on the ground, and contains 12 to 15 eggs. Hatching occurs after an incubation period of 28 days. Broods usually appear in the first week of June. The young poults are active as soon as they hatch. Predators such as foxes and goshawks may take a few young turkeys, and cold spring rains can easily chill the poorly-feathered young birds. Young turkeys remain with their mother for at least 4 to 5 months. Turkeys learn from each other, often by imitation, and, by associating with older more experienced birds, remember the layout of their home ranges and the location of various foods.

Food: Adult turkeys feed mainly on plant material, including acorns, nuts (especially hickory), grapes, skunk cabbage, barberry and other berries and tubers. They will scratch the ground seeking food. Poults feed heavily on insects during the summer. During the winter, open springs and seeps are an important source of food.

The Pecking Order: Wild turkeys live in flocks organized by "pecking order." This pecking order is a social ranking in which each bird is dominant over or "pecks on" birds of lesser social status. Pecking order has implications for people and nuisance turkeys. Turkeys may attempt to dominate or attack people that the

birds view as subordinates. This behavior is most noticeable during breeding season. Once bold behavior is established, it can be very difficult or impossible to change. Turkeys may also respond aggressively to shiny objects or reflections. Since the stimulus to drive away the “intruder” is strong, and since the reflection does not disappear when the turkey confronts it, the bird will often continually display towards or attack the reflection until changing light conditions cause it to vanish.

PREVENTING CONFLICTS WITH TURKEYS

DON'T FEED TURKEYS — Keep wild things wild! Feeding, whether direct or indirect, can cause turkeys to act tame and may lead to bold or aggressive behavior, especially in the breeding season.

KEEP BIRD FEEDER AREAS CLEAN — Use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground, as the seed attracts turkeys and other wild animals. Clean up spilled seed from other types of feeders daily. Remove feeders in the spring, as there is plenty of natural food available for all birds.

DON'T LET TURKEYS INTIMIDATE YOU — Don't hesitate to scare or threaten a bold, aggressive turkey with loud noises, swatting with a broom or water sprayed from a hose. A dog on a leash is also an effective deterrent.

COVER WINDOWS OR OTHER REFLECTIVE OBJECTS — If a turkey is pecking at a shiny object such as a vehicle or window, cover or otherwise disguise the object. Harass the bird by chasing it, squirting with a hose or other means of aggression.

PROTECT YOUR GARDENS AND CROPS — You can harass turkeys searching for food in your gardens. Dogs tethered on a run can also be effective in scaring turkeys away from gardens. Netting is another option to employ. In agricultural situations, some scare devices are effective.

EDUCATE YOUR NEIGHBORS — Pass this information along: Your efforts will be futile if neighbors are providing food for turkeys or neglecting to act boldly towards the birds. It requires the efforts of the entire neighborhood to help keep wild turkeys wild.

Turkeys are important and valuable birds in Massachusetts. They are classified as game birds for which regulated hunting seasons and management programs have been established. If you are experiencing problems with turkeys or have any questions regarding them, contact your nearest MassWildlife District Office. More detailed information on turkeys is also available on our website: www.mass.gov/masswildlife.

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For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646

Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown: (413) 323-7632

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607

Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145

Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406

Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

or visit our website at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts

MassWildlife “Balancing the needs of wildlife with the needs of people.”