

Natural Resource Protection News

From the Town of Canandaigua Environmental Conservation Board

The Wild Turkey

By: ECB member Gary Kochersberger



Thanksgiving is approaching and many thoughts turn to turkey, a staple of our Thanksgiving feasts, many modified this year by COVID. Although the 30 pound Butterball coming out of the oven may bear less resemblance to the more sleek group of turkeys we encounter in the wild, they are in fact, cousins. Mexican turkeys were domesticated by the Aztec people of ancient Mexico beginning around 800 B.C. Spanish invaders brought the birds back to Europe and through confusion with other flightless Mediterranean fowl they acquired the name Turkey. These birds continued to be further domesticated and raised in Europe and were eventually reintroduced back to North American farms for

us to enjoy at Thanksgiving.

But back to the wild turkey. They evolved in North America 10 million years ago and are related to grouse and pheasants – all belonging to the biological order galliformes (heavy bodied, ground feeding birds which also includes chickens). Turkeys migrated northward and further evolved, eventually appearing throughout the US and into Canada and providing an important food source for indigenous peoples. As Europeans settled in America, forests were cleared and hunting depleted the wild turkey population. Turkeys had vanished from New York State by the late 1800s. Attempts at restoring the turkey population began in the 1930s and was prompted by sporting and hunting clubs. Hunting regulations were introduced and game-farm raised turkeys were released in the thousands, but since young turkeys (poults) learn foraging and other life survival skills from their mothers, these efforts proved unsuccessful. In the 1950s a new program of trap and release was introduced. By the late 1950s turkeys had migrated from the Allegheny national forest in Pennsylvania to Allegany State Park in New York's southern tier. A catch and release program was initiated there, successfully introducing turkey populations to other parts of the state. An exhibit documenting these efforts is on display at the Allegany State Park Administration Building Museum.

Turkeys breed in the early spring and 10-12 eggs are laid over a two week period, hatching in about four weeks' time in late May or early June. Although turkeys spend much time feeding in open woods, nesting occurs beneath brush piles or thick shrubs, with eggs laid in depressions formed from scratching and then lined with leaves. Poults are precocial, meaning they are born with open eyes, well developed down and with the ability to move about on their own. They begin mimicking the feeding behaviors of their mothers in the first 2 days and within 2 weeks can fly short distances. "Imprinting," which is when an animal learns to identify with its parent and own species, probably starts to occur while the poults are still in the eggs, just before hatching, and able to hear the hen's calls. It is the hens who raise the poults, the Tom turkeys are not to be found. To avoid predation, the hen and her brood quickly leave the nest – traveling up to 200 yards on the first day after hatching. Wild turkeys face an uphill battle in reaching maturity. Many nests are destroyed or abandoned and it has been estimated that only 7% of broods will survive the first month after hatching. Particularly wet springs contribute to mortality. Wild turkeys are prey species, heavily selected by predators. The large numbers of eggs laid is a way of compensating for this, but turkey populations continue to be challenged. Predators attacking turkeys include mink, raccoons, coyotes, dogs, feral cats and skunks. The turkey's diet is varied and seasonal and includes insects and various plants and fruit as well as acorns and other nuts (mast). The latter is particularly important in winter months when turkeys may also visit farmers' fields picking through spread manure or waste grains. Mobility and energy expenditure decreases in the winter when food supply is limited. Turkeys are thought to be able to

survive a couple of weeks without food when winter weather is particularly severe.

The turkey population in New York peaked around 2001 when it was estimated there was approximately 250,000 birds. Currently it is thought the population is around 180,000 statewide, but this has fluctuated and is often weather related. With appropriate hunting regulations and habitat management, it is hoped that the wild turkey will continue to be an important part of New York's fauna.



References:

- [New York State Department of Environmental Conservation – Wild Turkey](#)
- [National Wild Turkey Federation](#)

Hutto, J (2011) *Illumination in the Flatwoods* Vast Horizons Productions, Lander Wyoming

Prevent Unintentional Spread of Invasive Species Hitchhiking in Firewood!

Watch this short video clip from DEC about why they regulate the transport of firewood.

