

Florida (Osceola) Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo osceola



There are only two species of wild turkey in the world: the North American Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) which is divided into five distinct subspecies, and the Ocellated Turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*) which is found in the Yucatan in Central America.

The five North American subspecies are Eastern, Florida or Osceola, Rio Grande, Merriam's, and Gould's. All five range throughout different parts of the continent.

The Florida Wild Turkey is found only on the peninsula of Florida. It's similar to the Eastern Wild Turkey, but it is smaller and darker in color with less white veining in the wing quills. Black bars predominate the feathers. When the wings are folded on the back, there are no whitish triangular patches as seen on the Eastern.

Most of the feathers exhibit a metallic glittering, called iridescence, with varying colors of red, green, copper, bronze and gold. The gobbler, or male, is more colorful, while the hen is a drab brownish or lighter color to camouflage her with her surroundings.

Two major characteristics distinguish males from females: spurs and beards. Both sexes have long, powerful legs covered with scales and are born with a small button spur on the back of the leg. Soon after birth, a male's spur starts growing pointed and curved, growing to about two inches. Most hen's spurs do not grow. Gobblers also have beards, which are tufts of modified feathers, growing out from the chest. Beards can grow to an average of nine inches, although they can grow much longer. 10 to 20 percent of hens have also have beards.

Wild turkeys have excellent vision during the day but don't see as well at night. They are also very mobile. Turkeys can run at speeds up to 25 mph, and they can fly up to 55 mph.

Turkey populations can reach large numbers in small areas because of their

ability to forage for different types of food. Early morning and late afternoon are the desired times for eating.

Wild turkeys are omnivorous, foraging on the ground or climbing shrubs and small trees to feed. They prefer eating hard mast such as acorns, nuts, and various seeds as well as various berries, roots, and insects. Turkeys also occasionally consume amphibians and small reptiles such as lizards and snakes.

Poults (chicks) will eat insects, berries, and seeds. Wild turkeys often feed in farm pastures, sometimes visit backyard bird feeders, and favor croplands after harvest to scavenge seed on the ground. Turkeys are also known to eat a wide variety of grasses.

Wild turkeys like open areas for feeding, mating and habitat. They use forested areas as cover from predators and for roosting in trees at night. A varied habitat of both open and covered area is essential for turkey survival.

Males are polygamous, mating with as many hens as they can. Males display for females by puffing out their feathers, spreading out their tails and dragging their wings. This behavior is most commonly referred to as strutting. Their heads and necks are colored brilliantly with red, blue and white. The color can change with the turkey's mood, with a solid white head and neck being the most excited.

They use gobbling, drumming/booming and spitting as signs of social dominance, and to attract females.

Courtship begins during the early spring, which is when turkeys are still flocked together in winter areas. The male's gobble is so loud it can often be heard a mile away.

Males may be seen courting in groups, often with the dominant male gobbling, spreading tail feathers (strutting), drumming/booming and spitting.

In a study, the average dominant male that courted as part of a pair of males fathered six more eggs than males that courted alone. Genetic analysis of pairs of males courting together shows that they are close relatives, with half of their genetic material being identical. The theory behind the team-courtship is that the less dominant male has a greater chance of passing along shared genetic material than if it were courting alone.

After mating, the hens begin searching for a nest site and laying eggs. In most areas, nests can be found on the ground in a shallow depression that is hidden by brush, grass, vines or other vegetation. She lays a clutch of 10 to 12 eggs during a two-week period, usually laying one egg a day. Eggs are incubated for 25-31 days, and she occasionally turns and rearranges them until they are ready to hatch.

Poults are covered with down at birth and leave the nest shortly after hatching. A newly-hatched flock must be ready to leave the nest within 12 to 24 hours to feed. The chicks feed themselves shortly after birth. Male poults stay with the mother through the fall. Female poults remain with their mother until the next spring.

Young turkeys quickly learn to fend for themselves in the mother/child flocks which can include dozens. Males have no role in the care of the young.