

## *Fun Facts about Wild Turkeys From The Town Turkey*



The turkey is one of the most famous birds in North America. In fact, Benjamin Franklin wanted to make the wild turkey, not the Bald Eagle, the national bird of the United States!

The turkey's popularity comes from the American people's love of eating the bird for special occasions like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The wild turkey we usually see in photos or pictures is not the same as the domestic turkey that we serve at Thanksgiving. Domestic or tame turkeys weigh twice what a wild turkey does and are raised on farms for profit. Most domestic turkeys are so heavy they are unable to fly.

Wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) live in woods in parts of North America and are the largest game birds found in this part of the world. They spend their days foraging for food like acorns, seeds, small insects and wild berries. They spend their nights in low branches of trees (yes, wild turkeys can fly!).

### *Tom Turkey's Tale of a Tail*



Peacocks aren't the only birds who use their fancy tails to attract a mate. Each spring male turkeys try to befriend as many females as possible. Male turkeys, also called "Tom Turkeys" or "Gobblers" puff up their bodies and spread their tail feathers (just like a peacock).

They grunt, make a "gobble gobble sound" and strut about shaking their feathers. This fancy turkey trot helps the male attract females (also called "hens") for mating.

After the female turkey mates, she prepares a nest under a bush in the woods and lays her tan and speckled brown eggs. She incubates as many as 18 eggs at a time. It takes about a month for the chicks to hatch.

When the babies (known as poults) hatch they flock with their mother all year (even through the winter). For the first two weeks the poults are unable to fly. The mother roosts on the ground with them during this time.

Wild turkeys are covered with dark feathers that help them blend in with their woodland homes. The bare skin on the throat and head of a turkey can change color from flat gray to striking shades of red, white, and blue when the bird becomes distressed or excited.



### *Where did the turkey get its name?*

Have you ever wondered what Turkey (the country in the Middle East) and the American bird have in common? A case of mistaken identity resulted in the American Turkey being named after the country. When the Spanish first found the bird in the Americas more than 400 years ago they brought it back to Europe. The

English mistakenly thought it was a bird they called a "turkey" so they gave it the same name. This other bird was actually from Africa, but came to England by way of the Turkey (lots of shipping went through Turkey at the time). The name stuck even when they realized the birds weren't the same.

### *Turkey Terms*

**Caruncle** - brightly colored growths on the throat region. Turns bright red when the turkey is upset or during courtship.

**Gizzard** - a part of a bird's stomach that contains tiny stones. It helps them grind up food for digestion.

**Hen** - a female turkey.

**Poult** - a baby turkey. A chick.

**Snood** - the flap of skin that hangs over the turkey's beak. Turns bright red when the turkey is upset or during courtship.

**Tom** - a male turkey. Also known as a gobbler.

**Wattle** - the flap of skin under the turkey's chin. Turns bright red when the turkey is upset or during courtship.

**Scientific genus and species:** *Meleagris gallopavo*

SOURCE: KIDZONE



### *Are there lots of wild turkeys in Illinois?*

Wild turkeys were abundant in Illinois prior to European settlement, but their numbers declined steadily during the 1800s due to over-hunting and the clearing of forests, which are a necessary component of turkey habitat. The state legislature closed turkey hunting in 1903, in an effort to preserve the remaining populations. That measure proved to be too little too late, though, and by 1910 wild turkeys had been eliminated from Illinois altogether.

Some turkey habitat was regained as marginal farms in the southern and western parts of the state were abandoned and returned to forest during the first half of the twentieth century. This fact gave hope to state efforts at turkey reintroduction, which began in 1959. The birds involved in this program were obtained from other states where turkey populations had already rebounded in exchange for animals that were doing well here—Canada geese, largemouth bass, bobwhite quail. From the 1970s through the year 2000 Illinois also transplanted turkeys from areas where they were thriving to suitable habitat that had not yet been re-colonized.

Illinois now boasts wild turkeys in just about every habitat that will support them, and recent estimates put the state population at 135,000. Harvests by hunters break records from one year to the next, with this year's spring take statewide surpassing fifteen thousand birds.

Whether you hunt them or appreciate them from a distance, wild turkeys are fascinating birds. For one thing, they're big. Adult males, or gobblers, measure about four feet from bill tip to tail tip and weigh from seventeen to twenty-one pounds on average. Hens are smaller, measuring closer to three feet long and generally weighing from eight to eleven pounds, but they are still large birds. Despite their size wild turkeys can also be very fast when they need to be. They can hit speeds up to twenty-five miles per hour running, and they can fly at speeds of up to fifty-miles an hour in short bursts to escape from predators.

SOURCE: ENVIRONMENTAL ALMANAC