

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo

Background

Wild turkeys were abundant in Connecticut when the first settlers arrived. However, a combination of forest clearing and a series of severe winters eliminated the turkey from Connecticut by the early 1800s. From the 1950s through the early 1970s, attempts at wild turkey restoration through artificial propagation were largely unsuccessful. The major breakthrough in restoration efforts occurred when free-roaming wild turkeys were live-captured and translocated using a rocket net. This large, lightweight net is fired by rockets from a remote blind and carried over turkeys that have been attracted to the area by bait.

Between 1975 and 1992, 356 wild turkeys were released at 18 sites throughout the state. These releases and subsequent population expansion have resulted in the successful restoration of wild turkeys to all 169 Connecticut towns. Recent land use practices in Connecticut have also favored the expansion of wild turkey populations as the landscape has become more forested. As a result of restoration efforts and the increase in forest habitat, sportsmen have been able to hunt wild turkeys since 1981, and landowners and others have enjoyed observing them in their natural state.

Range

In the United States, five subspecies of wild turkey inhabit 49 states, not including Alaska. The subspecies which exists in Connecticut, *Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*, ranges from southern Maine to northern Florida, west to eastern Texas and north to North Dakota.

Description

The eastern wild turkey is a large, majestic bird. Adult



© PAUL J. FUSCO

males weigh anywhere between 15 and 25 pounds, and measure 48 inches. Adult females are smaller, weighing between 8 and 12 pounds and measuring 36 inches.

Males or “toms” are dark in coloration with iridescent feathers. They have a fleshy, unfeathered head that is brightly-colored in red, white, and blue, especially during the mating season. Toms also have spurs (up to 1.5 inches in length) on their legs, and a hair-like beard (up to 12 inches long) protruding from their breast.

Female turkeys (hens) are lighter in coloration (brown and buff colored). They lack spurs and have a pale blue head. Although uncommon, a small percentage of hens will have a beard.

Habitat and Diet

Wild turkeys inhabit a mixture of mature hardwood forests and open fields. They frequently forage in fields that border forestland.

The diet of wild turkeys include acorns and other mast (hard fruit), fleshy fruits, corn, a variety of seeds, and invertebrates. Young turkeys (poults) feed heavily on insects.

Life History

The breeding season starts in late March and early April when toms begin gobbling and displaying for the hens. Turkeys are considered polygamous breeders, as toms will mate with many hens and hens may breed with more than one tom. Males establish a pecking order of dominance, and the most dominant male may breed with most of the hens in an area.

Hens lay a clutch of 8 to 14 eggs at the rate of about 1 egg per day. The eggs are incubated for 28 days beginning when the final egg is laid. Once hatched, the poults will remain with the hen throughout summer, fall, and winter. In late summer, hens with their broods will join up to form flocks. Flocks of up to 100 birds have been reported in Connecticut, but commonly the flocks number from 10 to 20 birds. On occasion, adult toms will join the flock, but more often will form groups of their own or travel as individuals.

Interesting Facts

Although usually seen on the ground, turkeys do fly. A wild turkey may range over several square miles in one day.

The tracks of an adult tom are 6 to 7 inches long; adult hen tracks are 4.5 to 5 inches long.

The wild turkey fares better in less-disturbed areas. However, in some areas of dense human populations, where food and cover are plentiful, turkeys have adapted and seem to survive well. Few predators are able to catch an adult wild turkey. The turkey's well-developed instinct for survival and excellent eyesight and hearing help to keep it out of harm's way. Hens on the nest, as well as poults during their first few weeks of life, are most vulnerable to predation. Free-ranging domestic dogs can severely reduce nesting success in populated areas.

Management

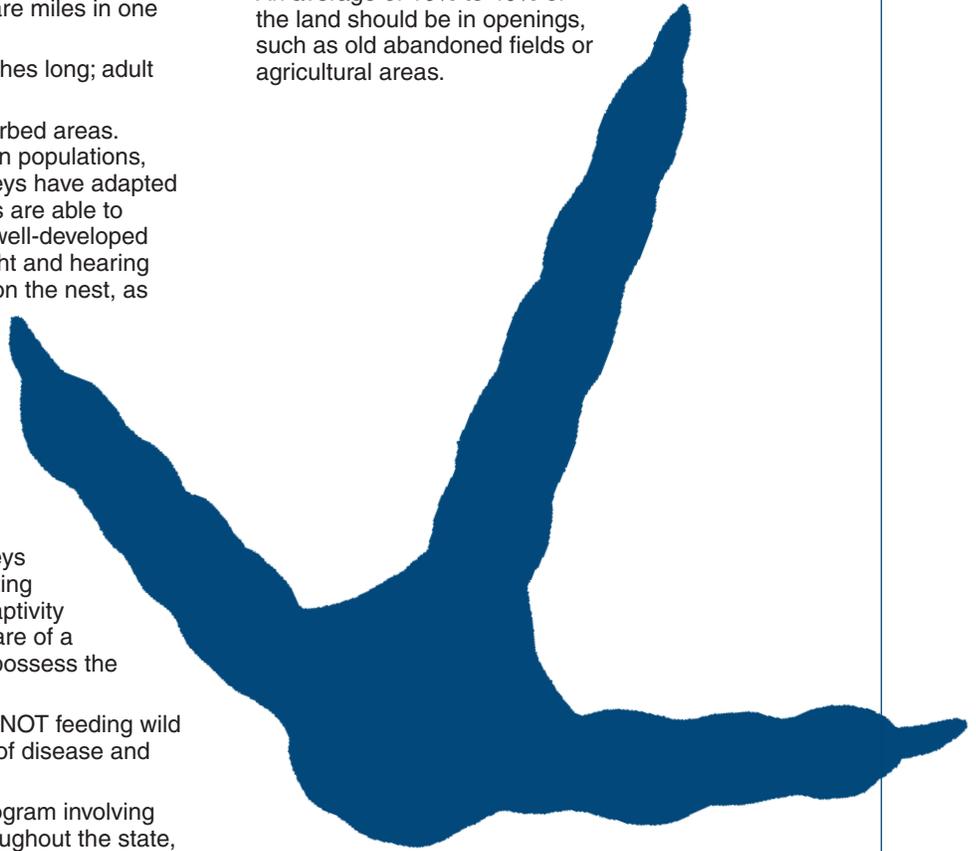
A Connecticut regulation prohibits individuals from releasing any turkey into the wild. Releasing pen-raised turkeys only jeopardizes the survival of the existing wild turkey population. Birds raised in captivity are host to a reservoir of diseases and are of a poorer genetic strain. They also do not possess the instincts to survive in the wild.

The DEP Wildlife Division recommends NOT feeding wild turkeys, as this encourages the spread of disease and loss of wild instincts.

Thanks to the successful restoration program involving the trap and transfer of wild turkeys throughout the state, Connecticut has a healthy population of wild turkeys. In addition, Connecticut has assisted other states with wild turkey restoration efforts. Between 1987 and 1997, Connecticut provided 188 birds to other states including: Maine (101), Louisiana (17), North Carolina (51), and Texas (19).

Landowners can help to encourage and maintain the state's wild turkey population through various wildlife habitat improvements:

1. Leave a high percentage of mature (14-inch diameter or larger) mast-producing trees such as oak, hickory, beech, and ash.
2. Create small, irregularly-shaped, 1- to 3-acre forest openings isolated from roads and houses. The brush in these openings should be cut every 1 to 3 years, preferably in late summer; at this time there is little chance of disturbing a nest.
3. Encourage the growth of grape vines, hawthorn trees, juniper bushes, and winterberry to produce food and cover.
4. It is beneficial to leave a few edge rows of corn (preferably in isolated areas) as a winter food source.
5. Leave clumps of conifers for cover, such as hemlock or white pine. As a general rule, the best turkey habitat consists of 50% to 75% forestland with half of this in mature hardwood and 10% in conifers. An average of 10% to 40% of the land should be in openings, such as old abandoned fields or agricultural areas.



Turkey track shown at actual size.

