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The Wonderful Wild Turkey

(Meleagris gallopavo)



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I was reminded of these birds on a recent trip to Montana. We saw flocks of Wild Turkeys roaming in the yards in some of the towns. One flock probably had twenty-five to thirty birds in it. They looked so docile that I drove into the driveway and watched them a while convinced that they were raised by the farmer and pinioned (as mine were) but to my amazement one stretched his neck and flapped his wings which were full feathered. Later I was told that this is common in the Flathead Valley where we were.

Nearly everyone in America has heard of, or has seen, a turkey. Perhaps this is because of our traditional celebration of the Thanksgiving holiday. None will argue that the turkey is a tasty old bird. Millions of domesticated turkeys are raised by the turkey industry each year for the table. This domesticated and improved "meat bird" was bred and developed from the wild turkey.

What most people do not know about the turkey is that it is found only in the Western hemisphere in modern times as well as in the past. Not even a fossil of a turkey has ever been found anywhere else in the world (Williams, 1991). The only other living relative of the American wild turkey is the smaller and more colorful Ocellated turkey found in Southern Mexico and Central America. American Indians introduced European immigrants to tomatoes, corn, beans, tobacco, and other vegetable crops. They also introduced the turkey in a domesticated form. It is interesting to note that the wild turkey of the Eastern United

States has never been domesticated. It is not the scope of this article to get into the many different strains of the domesticated turkey but a better understanding of the wild turkey can be had if one is somewhat familiar with the domesticated turkey. The common bronze domesticated turkey still exhibits some of the beautiful shining colorings of the wild turkey. Also, the behavior of the domesticated turkey is very similar to the wild turkey.

My first experiences with the turkey was many years ago when I was in high school. My parents bought me five hens and one gobbler bronze turkeys to use as a Vocational Agriculture Project. My assignment was to raise young turkeys to maturity and of course keep adequate records to get a good grade. These birds had free range on about three acres of land and at night they roosted in the trees away from predators. In the Spring when laying season came around they "stole" their nests out in the woods and fields just like their wild cousins. It was no easy chore to follow a hen back to her nest as they are very wary birds. As I remember, they were beautiful birds, became quite tame and were very good layers and parents.

The wild turkey's head is a patriotic red, white and blue and the bird was highly revered by early Americans, it was not nominated for a place on the National Emblem of the United States as is widely believed. I have always believed that Benjamin Franklin nominated the bird but history proves me wrong. He actually preferred a scene of Moses parting the Red Sea and Pharaoh's chariots being

engulfed in the flood. Franklin's support for the wild turkey and his unfavorable comments about the bald eagle were written in a letter to his daughter Sarah in 1784 after the bald eagle had already been selected as our national bird. Certainly, we who know the wild turkey would agree with Franklin in the matter.

A study of past and present wild turkey census is very interesting as it shows them becoming extinct in many areas, thriving in others, and making a comeback thanks to restocking programs. During the last 50 years the wild turkey has been reinstated back into its original range and wild populations exist in 11 states that formerly had no wild turkeys. They occur in 49 states and their number has been estimated to be more than three million. Now they are abundant enough for many states to have a hunting season each year to harvest thousands of surplus birds. In the wild there are four types of wild turkey flocks:

- 1) Family flocks, made up of brood hens with their young;
- 2) adult hen flocks, make up of hens that were not successful in raising poults;
- 3) adult gobbler flocks, comprised of gobblers that regrouped following the mating season, and
- 4) immature gobbler flocks that form in late fall when the young males leave the family flocks (Williams, 1991).

Some of these flocks number over 20 birds but more stability is had when small flocks of a dozen or so are

formed. Recently when driving through West Texas I spotted a large flock of Rio Grande wild turkeys foraging along the road and I counted about 18 birds. This was in the winter and I am sure that some of the birds were young poults. I stopped the car and watched them as they casually walked down the side of the road looking for food. This was on an Interstate highway but they apparently are used to the noise of the road.

Turkeys can become quite tame. I learned that they respond to "kindness" as much as any bird. If the keeper is gentle to the birds they tame down and are not afraid at all. Rough treatment will reverse this which indicates that they are not as dumb as many would have us believe. We had some Merriam wild turkeys in Montana and they became so tame I could walk into their pen and pet them. Their pen was open on the top as I had clipped their wings. It was hard to believe these were real wild turkeys. However, the wild turkey is a very high strung creature and is very nervous under certain circumstances. Clifford Glabe, who was trapping and relocating wild turkeys for Florida State Game and Freshwater Fish Commission relates how he closed the trap door on eighteen wild turkeys and immediately 14 of them fell dead. Autopsies showed ruptured blood vessels around the heart. Studies have shown that throughout their life this nervousness is prevalent. Perhaps this characteristic enables them to survive in the wild. I suppose some strains of wild turkey have been in captivity long enough to lose some of this nervousness.

WILD TURKEY SUBSPECIES

Not all wild turkeys have the so-called normal coloration in their plumage. Mutations occur along with rare recessive genes which account for a few specimens that are white, roan, speckled, and other colors (Williams, 1991). Just because a wild turkey has a different color does not mean that he is a cross between a domesticated variety.

In distinguishing the subspecies of the wild turkey, the scientists considered such things as color, size, and geographical location. (Perhaps at a future date I can do an article and include color photographs of each of the different subspecies). There are five subspecies of the American wild turkey recognized. The subspecies of southern Mexico which is said to be the progenitor of the modern domestic turkey became extinct before the Spaniards arrived. This subspecies was killed out by the Indians near the heavily populated areas around Mexico City (Leopold, 1959).

In North America and Canada the other five subspecies still are found in their original range and in newly stocked ranges. The Ocellated turkey is the only other living turkey species in the world and lives in Southern Mexico and Central America. I will discuss this bird later.

Eastern Wild Turkey

(Meleagris gallopavo silvestris)

The name *silvestris* is given to this subspecies which means "of the woodlands" to designate populations in the Eastern United States north of Florida. This is perhaps the best known subspecies because of the experiences of the early Pilgrims and the beginning of the Thanksgiving holiday.

Thomas Morton (1637) one of the earliest writers, says:

"Turkies there are, which divers times in great flocks have sallied by our doores; and then a gunne, being commonly in a redinesse, salutes them with such a courtesie, as makes them take a turne in the Cooke roome. They daunce by the doore so well."

The rump and tail margins are brown. The tips of the wing primary feathers have white and black bars that extend from the outer edge across each feather to the feather shaft. In this subspecies the white bars are as wide and prominent as the black. The secondary wing feathers also have prominent white bars and are edged in white, producing a whitish triangular area on each side of the back when the wings are closed.

Florida Wild Turkey

(Meleagris gallopavo osceola)

The name *osceola* designates populations of the Florida Peninsula as a distinct subspecies. The subspecies is named in honor of the 19th century Florida Seminole Indian leader.

The Florida wild turkey is much like the eastern subspecies except that more black and less white are seen in the primary and secondary wing feathers. The general tone is somewhat darker. The white wing feather bars are narrow, irregular and broken. When the wing is folded on the back, these feathers do not form a whitish triangular patch as in the eastern.

Birds and mammals that live in humid climates are darker colored than examples of the same species living in more arid climates (Williams, 1991). Feather wear is accelerated when they are damp. Nature prevents excessive wear by providing additional substance called melanin which makes feathers appear darker. Thus, the Florida subspecies is darker than any of the rest.

The brown markings on the outer edge of the tail and rump distinguish both the Eastern and Florida subspecies from the three western subspecies. Their feathers are tipped with a much lighter shade of tan, buff, and white. The tail margin is darkest in the Florida subspecies, next darkest in the eastern turkey, and progressively lighter in

the Rio Grande, Merriams, and Goulds turkeys, in that order (Williams, 1991).

Rio Grande Wild Turkey

(*Meleagris gallopavo intermedia*)

When George B. Sennett (1879) first called attention to the characteristics in which the Rio Grande turkey differs from the other races of wild turkeys, he evidently thought it was an intermediate and should not be named, for he said, at that time: "*All Lower Rio Grande specimens, therefore, must be held as the Mexican form-an alternative not to be desired.*" Later on, however, he (1892) described and named it *ellioti*, in honor of Dr. Daniel Elliot. But his earlier name, *intermedia*, must stand under the law of priority (Bent, 1932). This subspecies was discovered and named some time later than the other subspecies of the east.

The Rio Grande subspecies is distinguished from the Eastern and Florida subspecies by having tail feathers and tail coverts tipped with light tan, rather than medium brown, and from the two other western subspecies by having a brownish tail margin that is darker than theirs (Williams, 1991).

Merriam's Wild Turkey

(*Meleagris gallopavo merriami*)

This is a bird of the ponderosa pine foothills of the Rocky Mountains. This subspecies was named in honor of

zoologist C. Hart Merriam. It is a cold weather bird and has been successfully stocked much farther north of its natural range. The Merriam's wild turkey is distinguished from the Eastern, Florida, and Rio Grande subspecies by the nearly white feathers of its lower back and tail margin (Williams, 1991).

Gould's Wild Turkey

(*Meleagris gallopavo mexicanus*)

This is also a bird of the high mountains. Named for the famous zoologist Gould who was the first to describe it. The Gould's is the largest wild turkey of the five subspecies. There is said to be a small population in the U.S. along parts of the U.S.-Mexico border but it is said to be abundant in Mexico.

The Ocellated Turkey

(*Agriocharis ocellata*)

This beautiful bird is a native of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and generally of Central America. It lives in subtropical lowland jungles through the summer and early fall, but about October 1 the birds begin visiting isolated cornfields to feed in early morning and afternoon (Leopold, 1972). As indicated by its name, its plumage is covered with metallic flashing ocelli like emeralds and diamonds which gave the species its vernacular name.

This bird is much smaller than any of the subspecies of the wild turkey and the skin of its head is partly bluish instead of being red as in the other wild turkeys. Ocellated round-ended tail feathers are very specific of the species. The reddish tail is tipped with pale cinnamon-brown, buffy, or light white. The mature males have the beard as in other turkeys.

Ocellated turkeys are polygamous in captivity as well as in the wild. The hen lays about a dozen eggs on the ground in a deep scrape. The eggs are cream colored with brown specks. Humidity should be around 50% and raised a few days before hatching to help break down the calcium in the egg shell.

These birds have become very rare in captivity in recent years. The stock became badly inbred through the years and no new blood was brought into the captive bloodlines. Years ago Mickey Olsen was very successful with these birds and raised many. Because of the shortage of good blood the price has gone to the roof with pairs being sold for as much as \$4000 per pair. The shortage of good blood is only one of the problems encountered with these beautiful birds. The males are often lethargic and have no interest in breeding although the hens are in good breeding condition. It has been discovered that another gobbler or two strutting sometimes provokes or stimulates the Ocellated gobbler to get interested in setting up house. Some breeders have run wild turkeys in a pen next to the Ocellated turkeys to give stimulation to the males.

Raising Wild Turkeys

Ideally, wild turkeys should be raised away from other types of birds. Peacocks mix with wild turkeys as they have the same types of constitution and disease resistance. Never, never put waterfowl near wild turkeys as there is a disease problem. Ground pens are necessary for breeding wild turkeys because of their size. The ground should not have been used in the past for other livestock especially swine. The breeding pens should be as large as possible to give the birds plenty of room to strut and not feel crowded. Predator control is a must because of the flighty nature of wild turkeys. If scared, they will fly up and hurt or kill themselves as they hit the top of the pen. As always, I recommend the electric fence as a predator deterrent. I put one strand along the bottom of the fence about three inches above the ground. Another strand is placed at about six inches above the ground and a third is placed about five or six feet above the ground. This plan will deter the smaller animals such as skunks and rodents from digging under the fence while the higher wire will deter the climbers such as house cats and raccoons. As a final touch I always put a strand along the top outside rail about six inches high to keep cats from walking along the rail and also to keep hawks and owls from perching on the fence disturbing the birds. Always keep the grass poisoned out or trimmed along the bottom of the fence to avoid shorting out the circuit. I have used this method of predator control for over 50 years and it has never failed. I could tell you stories

of terrible losses before I started using the electric fence charger.

Since the gobblers separate from the hens during the off-breeding season I separate the sexes during this time. This little trick really gets action as both the hens and gobblers are ready to breed when I put them together. Also, the competition of several gobblers strutting seems to stimulate breeding.

Eggs should be gathered every day during hot weather. Leave three eggs in the nest to encourage the hen to continue to lay a full clutch. Many have reported that wild turkey eggs are rather difficult to hatch in an incubator. To get around this set back, some breeders use broody chicken hens to do the work of incubation. Handle the eggs like any other egg by turning them each day while awaiting incubation. Keep the temperature around 55° F. while awaiting the start of incubation. The length of incubation is rather long for wild turkeys, 28 days at 99.4° F. Wild turkey poults are very sensitive to chilling. They must be kept warm and dry especially the first two weeks.

Cleanliness is very important in dealing with wild turkeys. They are susceptible to the common disease of Blackhead especially when they are young. I put a commercial product in the water to avoid this disease. The drug "Bacitracin" works very well in dealing with stress related problems in wild turkeys. I use the brand name Solu-tracin 200 which is really a miracle drug.

The above information applies to any of the subspecies of the wild turkey. If you are going to get into some of the more rare subspecies, I would recommend that you practice raising the more common ones for a year or two before getting the valuable birds. As a matter of fact, some experience raising the domesticated turkey will do wonders in wild turkey management. Learn how to incubate the common eggs and raise the common poults so you can handle the wild turkeys in a more educated way. The methods are the same for any turkey except some measures should be made to control the nervous nature of the wild turkey mentioned earlier such as wing clipping and having plenty of good hiding places for the birds.

If you have the room and can stand to have noisy birds on your property, I would highly recommend getting some species of Wild turkey. They are a joy to have and offer lots of challenges.

Sources

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