Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Wild Turkey

While Benjamin Franklin was unsuccessful in making the turkey the United State's national bird, the turkey still holds an important place in American culture and environments. The wild turkey is native to North America and is one of only two domesticated birds native to the New World. Habitat loss and overhunting led to massive population declines in the 1800s, and the last original wild turkeys disappeared from New York around the mid 1840s. Wild turkeys did not return to the state until 1949, nearly 100 years later, when wild turkeys from Pennsylvania crossed the border into New York. Thanks to reintroduction efforts, an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 wild turkeys now roam New York woodlands. They generally form single gender flocks of 5 to 50 individuals, with home ranges varying from 400 to 2,000 acres. Turkeys need a variety of habitats to support their feeding, breeding and roosting needs, so ideal ranges include a mixture of woodlands, fields, meadows, brush lands and swampy forests.

Wild turkeys are omnivorous, and their diet varies greatly with what's available in the season. In spring and summer, adults feed on various vegetation (tubers, roots, flowers, fruits), insects (grasshoppers, dragonflies), other invertebrates (snails), and even small vertebrates (salamanders, frogs, small snakes). In midsummer, two or more broods will often combine, forming a flock that will roam over wide areas in search of food. In late summer and early fall, flocks will spend more time in the woodlands foraging on fruits, seeds and nuts like beechnuts and acorns.

During the winter, turkeys will merge into large flocks, sometimes exceeding 200. They move around less, choosing to stay around valley farm fields where they can eat waste grain and manure, or near spring seeps usually free of ice and snow. They eat vegetation, fruits and nuts left over from the fall, scratching through 4 to 6 inches of snow to find food if needed. Turkeys

The Eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is a large, ground-feeding bird. Adult males, called “toms” or “gobblers”, have a dark glossy black-brown body, red, blue and white skin on their heads, and a long “beard” of hair-like feathers on their chests. Males have spurs on their legs that can be up to 1 1/2 inches long and are used to fight other males. Toms generally measure 2 1/2 to 3 feet tall and weigh between 16 and 20 pounds. However, they can weigh up to 25 pounds. Female turkeys (hens) are smaller than toms, usually measuring 2 feet tall and weighing 9 to 12 pounds. Less ornate than toms, hens have a rusty-brown body and a blue-gray head, and almost all hens lack beards or leg spurs.
will spend a week or greater roosting if a severe winter storm hits, and can survive up to two weeks without food.

Turkeys can walk, run, fly and even swim. They can run at 12mph and fly at speeds around 40 to 55 mph. They have keen hearing and superb eyesight. This is crucial for the survival of young turkeys, which are heavily preyed upon by mink, weasels, domestic dogs, coyotes, raccoons, skunks and snakes. Sixty to seventy percent of poults (young turkeys) die during their first four weeks of life. Their vulnerability is unsurprising considering their only defense is to scatter and remain still until their mother gives the all-clear signal. Mature turkeys are preyed upon by foxes, bobcats, fisher, coyotes and great-horned owls.

Harkened by the tom's iconic "gobble", breeding season begins in late March or early April and continues through early June. Toms will stake out an individual breeding territory and gobble loudly to attract females and repel competing males. If a female approaches, the tom will begin his courtship dance, fluffing out his body feathers, fanning his broad tail, dragging his wings and strutting about. If he passes inspection, mating occurs and then the hen departs alone to nest. The male continues calling and dancing, and will try to mate with as many females as possible.

After leaving the dance floor, the hen seeks out a wooded or brushy area to create her loosely formed nest, a shallow depression in the soil lined with dried leaves. Areas with dense brush, tall grasses or plenty of fallen trees or branches make the best nesting habitat. In the absence of suitable nesting habitats or poor weather conditions, females can store sperm and delay fertilization for up to 8 weeks. She’ll lay 10 to 15 cream colored or light brown eggs, which will hatch around late May or early June. Soon after, the hen moves her younglings (poults), to grassy areas where they can feast on insects. If the poults survive, they will leave their mothers and join hen and tom flocks in the fall.

Since 2000-01, wild turkey populations have been gradually declining. The causes of this decline are still unknown, but has been attributed to predator increases, poor habitat quality, bad weather conditions (wet springs and summers, severe winters), and natural population contraction as turkey populations shrink to levels that can be supported by current environments. Another factor may be the arrival of a new disease in the U.S.: Lymphoproliferative Disease Virus (LPDV). LPDV is a tumor-forming virus affecting ground-feeding fowl, and was first confirmed in NY wild turkeys in 2012. Fortunately, preliminary research shows that while the infection is quite widespread and common, the development of tumors in the internal organs and skin rarely occurs. LPDV is most likely not the main cause for turkey declines, but much is still unknown about the disease.

You can help support turkey populations by providing a variety of habitat types and plant species on your land. Keeping in mind that their home ranges can be quite large, think about your land and the surrounding area. Are there good brooding habitats with grasses and forbes that will host plenty of insects for poults to feed on and nearby brushy escape cover? Is there good nesting habitat with low brush cover? If you’re logging an area, consider leaving and scattering the tops of trees to provide cover for nesting turkeys. Lastly, is there good winter feeding habitat? You may want to plant food plots of corn, sorghum, millet, sunflower and buckwheat, or simply support local dairy farms, which make up some of the best turkey winter feeding grounds. For
more information on creating wild turkey winter habitat, visit http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7279.html.

You can also help wildlife biologists monitor wild turkey populations by taking part in the NY DEC Winter Wild Turkey Flock Survey conducted January through March. If you’ve sighted wild turkeys in your area and want to help the DEC monitor the health of wild turkey populations, visit http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/48756.html. You can also help during August, when a similar survey is conducted to assess the reproductive success of wild turkeys this year http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/48732.html.

By Karen Ceballos and Kristi Sullivan

Is there a certain animal that you would like to see featured in an upcoming “Wild Things” column? If so, email Kristi Sullivan at kls20@cornell.edu