Paul Topham

Wild Turkey

At the time of colonial settlement, the wild turkey (*Melleagris gallopavo*) was abundant across Rhode Island. Due to habitat loss and overharvest, turkeys were extirpated from the state in the early 1900's. Rhode Island biologists conducted turkey reintroduction efforts in the 1980's and 1990's; today wild turkeys are found in virtually all areas of the state. Populations have rebounded so strongly that highly regulated, sustainable harvest of wild turkeys has been reinstated in Rhode Island.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: The wild turkey is native to North America and can be found in most of the eastern two thirds of the U.S. as well as small pockets along the west coast and in Mexico. Wild turkeys live year-round in open forests which are characterized by interspersed clearings (early successional forests and agricultural lands) in 49 states. In Rhode Island, turkeys use mature oak-hickory forests as well as forests comprised of red oak, beech, cherry and ash. They can also be found on farms and in suburban/urban communities.

Food Habits: Wild turkeys eat plant matter and tend to forage in flocks. In the winter and early spring turkeys are on the look out for acorns from red and white oaks along with American beech nuts, hickory nuts and other seeds and berries. During times of deep snow, turkeys will seek shelter in hemlock stands where they will feed on hemlock buds and evergreen ferns. During the spring they will strip seeds from sedges and grasses and will occasionally supplement their diet with insects.

Behavior: Wild turkeys spend most of their time traveling on foot, however, they can run and fly. As the sun begins to set, turkeys will fly into lower limbs of trees and make their way upward to a high roost spot. They generally roost in flocks, but sometimes individually.

In the spring, males gobble to attract females and warn competing males. They display for female birds by strutting with tail feathers fanned, wings lowered, while making non-vocal hums and chump sounds. Males will breed with multiple females and form all male flocks outside of the breeding season. Females are responsible for the poult (chick) rearing.

Poults (chicks) travel in family groups with their mother, often combining with other family groups to form large flocks (safety in numbers).

Wild turkey are hunted by coyotes, bobcats, raccoons, Great horned owls. Nest predators include raccoons, opossums, skunks, foxes, woodchucks, snakes, birds and rodents. A regulated hunting season exists for wild turkeys in the spring and fall.

Gerald Krausse

Reproduction: Wild turkeys nest on the ground, generally in dead leaves at the base of trees, under brush piles or in thick shrubbery. Occasionally they can be found nesting in open hayfields. Females will create a shallow depression in the soil and use dead leaves and other plant material at the site. Clutch size varies from 4-17 eggs; turkeys will only have one brood with an incubation period of 25-31 days. Eggs are pale yellow/tan and are evenly marked with reddish brown spots. In Rhode Island, breeding generally begins in March/April. Nest success is highly dependent on spring weather (rain and temperature). Eggs begin to hatch in June with poults (chicks) feeding primarily on insects.

DID YOU KNOW...

- Wild turkeys typically weigh between 5 and 25 pounds, but larger birds have been recorded.
- Wild turkeys have a wingspan between 4 and 5 feet.
- Turkey poults are fed by their mother for a few days, then learn to find food for themselves, while still under the watchful eye of their mother.
- Turkeys band together in flocks, especially during the winter; there have been records of winter groups comprised of over 200 turkeys.
- Turkeys have been around for a long time. Turkey fossils dating back 5 million years have been found across the U.S. and Mexico!

Wild turkey poults, Paul Topham

LIVING WITH TURKEYS

Turkeys live in suburban and urban areas. If you want to make your property less attractive to turkeys, follow these practices.

Don't feed turkeys!

Feeding turkeys, either directly or indirectly, can cause turkeys to become tame and can lead to bold or aggressive behavior around humans. This is particularly true during the breeding season in the spring.

Clean areas around bird feeders.

Use feeders that are designed to prevent seeds from ending up on the ground. This not only attacks turkeys but other wildlife as well. Remove feeders in the spring, as there is plenty of other natural food sources available at this time.

What can I do about nuisance turkeys?

If turkeys are a nuisance and exhibit aggressive behavior they can be deterred with loud noises, swatting with a broom or water sprayed from a hose. These techniques can also be used to deter turkeys from gardens. Cover up shiny objects as they will peck at their own reflections, especially during the breeding season as males are territorial.

QUESTIONS ABOUT TURKEYS?

Contact the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife
Phone: 401-789-0281
Email: DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov

Wild turkeys provide food and sport for hunters, and hunting permit sales generate funds for state wildlife conservation and management. In addition, revenue from hunting license fees and federal excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition is distributed back to Rhode Island in the form of grants from the Wildlife and Sport Fisheries Program. These grants are used for land acquisition, facility maintenance, wildlife management, and all the programs established for management and hunting in the state.