



**The Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Resources Division
EASTERN WILD TURKEY FACT SHEET**



HISTORY

The eastern wild turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*, is the largest gallinaceous bird in North America. However, due to unregulated hunting and habitat loss caused by forest clearing, wild turkeys were almost extirpated from Georgia by the early 1900s. As forests regenerated after the great depression, available wild turkey habitat increased. Implementation of conservation laws, advances in wildlife science and funding for wildlife restoration programs all played a role in the come back of the eastern wild turkey.

In 1973, Georgia's estimated wild turkey population was 17,000 birds but that year marked the start of the Georgia's wild turkey restoration program. Since that time with the help of its conservation partners, Wildlife Resources Division associates and volunteers have trapped and relocated more than 4,800 wild turkeys to over 300 suitable sites across the state. The wild turkey restoration program ended in 1996 and since then, with adequate protection and biologically sound hunting seasons, wild turkey populations in Georgia have increased to over 400,000 birds.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS & REPRODUCTION

Wild turkeys breed in the spring. After spending the winter in bachelor flocks, adult males, known as toms or gobblers, will disband and begin to strut and gobble in an effort to attract hens for mating. Adult males weigh between 17-21 pounds and have black-tipped breast feathers. The tom's featherless head is white-crowned with varying amounts of blue and red. Male gobblers have beards that grow to about 3-5 inches per year. Males also have spurs on their heels, which can be over 2 inches long.

Gobbling usually begins in March but can start in late-February or early April. A gobbler will mate with as many hens as possible and hens will mate with a gobbler more than once. Juvenile males, known as jakes, will also strut and gobble but are less successful at courting hens than older males. Jakes can be distinguished from the adult male gobblers by the 4-6 central feathers on the jakes tail fan. These feathers will be longer than the other tail feathers forming an uneven edge to the tail. Jakes also have smaller beards and spurs than adult gobblers.

Most hens will breed and nest during their first spring. Hens are smaller than toms and weigh 8-11 pounds and have buff-tipped breast feathers giving them a brown or tan coloration. The head of the female is a dull gray-blue with feathers extending up the back of the head. Although some hens can have beards most hens do not have beards or spurs. Hens are capable of retaining viable sperm for about two months. Therefore, all the eggs for an entire clutch and re-nesting attempt can be fertilized from one mating episode.

As the breeding season comes to an end, usually in April, hens nest in shallow depressions formed by scratching, squatting

and laying eggs. Nests are often at the base of trees or against fallen logs and are usually located near open areas. The nest is usually in dense enough vegetation to conceal the nest but allow the hen to view her surroundings from ground level.

Hens lay about one egg each day until the clutch, usually 10-12 eggs, is complete. Hens incubate the nest for about 28 days. After the poults hatch, they are ready to leave the nest in about 12-24 hours. The poults can walk and feed on insects when they are a day old. The hen will brood the chicks when they are cold or hot. The poults can take short flights when they are 8-days old and when they are about 2 weeks old; they begin to roost in trees at night with the hen. Most broods stay together 4-5 months and female poults may remain with the hen until the start of the next breeding season.

DIET

Almost 80% of the poult's diet in their first week of life is insects such as grasshoppers, beetles, and true bugs. Insects are high in protein, which is important for the fast-growing poults. As the poults age, they include more plant material in their diet. Quality wild turkey habitat is important to the poult's survival and consists of weedy or grassy openings with knee-high vegetation and scattered trees or shrubs that cover approximately 50 percent of the ground.

Plant material makes up most of the adult turkey's diet. Adult turkeys eat a variety of nuts, berries, plants and insects. Examples of foods eaten by wild turkeys include: acorns, beechnuts, pecans, pine seeds, blackberries, wild grapes, blueberries, poison ivy berries, grass seeds, snails and grasshoppers. Turkeys have also been known to eat small frogs, lizards and crayfish.

HABITAT

Wild turkeys need a mixture of forests and open areas to meet their seasonal habitat requirements. Quality turkey habitat is comprised of mature woodlands with open understories and well-developed midstories, interspersed with grassy or weedy openings.

By early autumn pecking orders have been established within flocks and by late autumn, males and females have usually formed separate flocks and moved into their winter range. This shift is normally from field to forest habitat. As the growing season ends, seeds and insects in the fields become less available and hard & soft mast in the forest become preferred foods. Throughout the winter turkeys congregate into large flocks in areas that offer shelter from the elements and reliable food sources. The following spring as the weather warms and the days become longer the flocks break up and the breeding cycle starts again.

Hen



Middle toe less than 4 inches long

Breast Feathers



Tom (Black Tip) Hen (Buff Tip)

Outer Wing Feathers



Adult Immature Hen Adult Immature Tom



Tom Hen



Gobbler



Middle toe greater than 4 inches long

Tail Feathers



Mature Tom (Adult) Immature Tom (Juvenile)