

Volume 28/Issue 3                      Wild Turkey                      November 2014

# WILD TURKEY

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# Let's Talk Turkey!

It's November, time for Thanksgiving! And that means turkey. More people eat turkey on Thanksgiving Day than any other holiday meal. Turkey has always been an important food source for people. In fact, our domesticated turkey came from wild turkeys that lived in Mexico. Explorers took some of these wild turkeys back to Europe in the late 1500s where they became domesticated. Years later, other explorers and settlers brought their domesticated birds back to North America. While all this was going on, wild turkeys still lived in North America. These birds were also used as food by early settlers and Native Americans.

Wild turkeys are one of our largest wild birds. They stand 43 to 45 inches tall and can weigh up to 24 pounds. They have long, powerful legs. Their wings seem short for such a large bird, but turkeys can quickly burst into flight. These quick bursts allow them to glide for up to a mile to get away from danger. Scientists have clocked turkeys flying at 60 miles-per-hour! Because turkeys are heavy, they cannot fly far. Instead, they rely on their legs to get where they need to go.

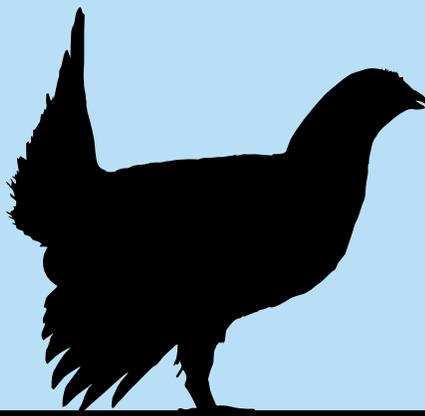
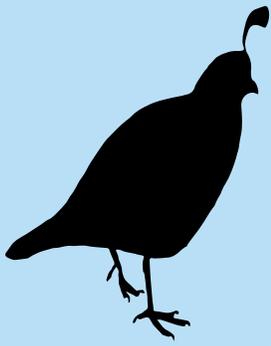
Turkeys are brownish over most of their bodies. The males, called toms, have a bronze sheen to their feathers. The wing feathers are barred with black and white. Females, called hens, have a few feathers on their heads, but the toms have

no feathers. The skin on the tom's head and neck is colorful. The head has a white forehead and blue face. The neck is red. In the spring, these colors become very bright, and are part of the male's breeding display. Tom turkeys also try to impress the hens by fanning their large tails and drooping their wings. They also gobble. You can hear a gobbling turkey more than one mile away!

Hens lay their eggs in a shallow nest on the ground. The eggs are tan with tiny reddish spots. Hens incubate the eggs for about 25 days. Baby turkeys are called poults. Poults are precocial (pre-CO-shall). This means poults are covered with downy feathers when they hatch out of their eggs and can leave the nest soon after hatching. Many ground-nesting birds are precocial. Since precocial birds can feed themselves, they do not have to stay in the nest waiting for their mother to bring food. Instead, they follow their mother to good sources of food, water and shelter.

Turkeys can live in many kinds of habitats. You can find turkeys in forested openings, grasslands, and even swamps. Their diet is made up of acorns, seeds, nuts, fruits, buds, insects and small animals like frogs, salamanders, and snakes. Family groups of hens and young turkeys spend the day looking for food. At sundown, the flock will fly into large trees where they will roost and rest for the night.





Turkeys are part of a large group of birds known as the galliformes (GAL-a-forms). There are almost 220 different species of galliformes. They live everywhere except South America and Antarctica. This group includes turkeys, pheasants, grouse, quail and partridge. Here in Idaho, we have 13 species.

These are secretive, ground-dwelling birds. Because they spend most of their time on the ground, many species in this group are not brightly colored. Their feathers are shades of brown, tan and gray with spots and streaks of black and white. Their feathers help the birds to camouflage. While they all can fly, they prefer to use their legs to get around. Their flight muscles are made for short bursts of speed, so they usually only fly when startled or going to a roost at night.

Some of these birds are very social. Flocks of turkeys, quail, chukar or partridge gather in the fall. They will spend the winter together. When spring comes, the males of many of these species really strut their stuff. Courtship means showing off by tail fanning, wing beating, wing drooping, stamping, and puffing of feathers. The males also make many strange sounds such as hoots, gobbles, humming, and popping noises. Males of some species do this by themselves to attract a mate. Others gather together in an open area called a "lek" to perform. Idaho's sage-grouse has one of the most incredible

# The Turkey Family

courtships of any bird in the world. Watching sage-grouse at a lek is an unforgettable experience!

All young birds of this group are precocial, and hatch at about the same time. This allows them to be able to leave the nest together, only hours after hatching. This is very important because

hatching eggs attract predators. Once they leave the nest, the young birds move about with their mother. She teaches them to avoid danger and find food. They grow very fast and can fly only ten days after hatching. Could you walk ten days after you were born? By fall, the youngsters have reached their adult size. Most of them will stay with the family flock all winter.



# What's Wild?

Animals can usually be put in two large categories, wild and domestic. How can you tell the difference? In general, it has to do with whether people help the animal to survive.

A wild animal is able to take care of itself with no help from people. It can find its own food, water, and shelter. What about the birds that visit your feeders? Even though you are providing food, birds are not completely dependent on your feeders. If the feeders become empty, the birds will simply move on and find food someplace else.

The same goes for a bird that uses a man-made nestbox. If the nestbox disappears, the birds will find another place to nest. They do not need people to provide shelter. Bird feeders and nestboxes are examples of things we do to help wild animals. Helping wildlife can be very important during severe weather or when habitat is lost. Even with help from humans, wild animals are still able to take care of themselves which keeps them wild.

A domesticated animal is an animal that depends upon people to survive. Think about

your pet. You give your pet food, water and shelter. Taking proper care of a pet is an important responsibility. If your pet had no one to take care of it, would it survive?

All pets and farm animals came from wild animals. Most turkeys we eat for Thanksgiving are raised on a farm, but at one time turkeys were only found in the wild. Our pet dogs are the descendants of wolves. Cattle became part of man's farms 6,000 to 7,000 years ago. Animals are often domesticated to help people. They may provide food, protection, company, transportation, or help with heavy tasks. Imagine farmers hundreds years ago having to plow large fields without the help of horses or oxen. Whew, what a job!

Sometimes domesticated animals are found where we expect wild animals to live. When a domesticated animal is living in the wild, it is called a "feral" animal. Cats are an example of an animal that can become feral. Often feral animals cause problems. Feral animals act like wild animals and catch their own food. Feral animals may harm wildlife; they compete for food and shelter that wild animals need or eat wildlife.

Do you think you will be able to tell if an animal is wild, domesticated or feral if you see it outdoors?



**Domestic Turkeys**

# Turkeys & Man

When we think of turkey, it is usually as Thanksgiving dinner. Turkeys have been an important source of food for a long time, but turkeys have meant much more to people than just a bird to eat. Turkeys have been used and worshipped by people for centuries in North America.

The Tarahumara Indians of Mexico saw turkeys as the bringers of spring rains. They noticed that spring rains came when the turkeys danced. It made sense to these people that the turkeys brought the rain, so the Tarahumara Indians began performing a special spring dance that imitated the courtship of wild turkeys. This dance is still performed today as part of special spring ceremonies.



Turkey feathers and bones were important to tribes in the eastern United States. They were used as decorations. Turkey feathers adorned the headdresses of many tribes.

Other kinds of clothes were also decorated with turkey feathers. The feathers were used to make fans for ceremonies and for everyday use. Turkey bones were used for many things such as beads, sewing needles, and hairpins. Some native people used turkey wing bones to make calls. The calls attracted male turkeys and made the birds easier to hunt.

Did you know that Benjamin Franklin wanted the wild turkey to be our national symbol? He called the turkey “a bird of courage.” Can you imagine having a turkey on our money instead of an eagle? Or the Apollo astronauts landing on the moon for the first time and saying “The turkey has landed!” Even though this might seem funny to us, it lets us know how important the wild turkey has been to many people for many years.



## Showing Off for the Girls

The breeding season is an important time for wildlife. The birth of animals allows a species to stay healthy by replacing animals that have died. Finding and attracting a mate can be a tough business. Male animals must do their best to convince the females that they are the best male. Showing off is a good way to attract a female’s attention.

The process of attracting a mate is called courtship. Courtship often involves singing, fighting, dancing, and strutting around. Males often become more colorful or grow decorations like antlers. These attract the females but also tell other males how tough their rivals might be.

In the turkey family, courtship displays are very complex. Many species have colorful vocal sacs on the neck that allow males to make sounds. Often these sounds can be heard a long way away. Feather displays, like tail fanning or wing drooping, to make the male look larger are common. Some males are known for dancing by stomping their feet on the ground. Put these all together, and you have a very impressive display for the females!

A favorite courtship display is that of the ruffed grouse. The male does something called drumming. He stands on a log and beats his wings as fast as possible. The result is a drumming sound that you almost feel instead of hear. This coming spring listen and look for the drumming of ruffed grouse, gobbling of turkeys and other birds showing off for the girls.



# Now You See It, Now You Don't

**T**urkeys and their relatives are colored a lot like their habitat. This helps them to blend in so they are not seen. They have what is called cryptic coloration. This is coloration that allows an animal to match its surroundings and camouflage.

When you think about wildlife, what colors do you think of? Brown, tan, buff, gray, black, white, and reddish come to mind. Red, purple, yellow and blue do not. How about patterns on the fur, skin or feathers? Do we see many wild animals with big, colorful stripes or checkerboard patterns? No, but we do see animals with small streaks, dots, patches, or stripes. We also see animals that are pretty much one color. These colors and patterns help the animal match its surroundings.

If you are a predator, you do not want your prey to see you coming. A bright red bobcat with yellow stripes could not sneak up on its prey very easily. Prey animals do not want to be seen either. An orange rabbit with big purple spots could easily be seen by a predator, but a brown rabbit sitting still on the forest floor would be hard to find. Being still plays a role in cryptic coloration. Even well-camouflaged animals can be seen if they do not know when to stay still. Have you ever been looking around and suddenly seen something move that you never even knew was there? Its movement gave it away. That's cryptic coloration at work.

Cryptic coloration is not for everyone. Some animals are brightly colored. Think about birds and butterflies. Birds are usually only colorful during the breeding season. Once summer is over, they lose their colorful feathers and become dull again. Bright colors can also be a warning that some critters taste bad or can sting. Predators learn to avoid these bright colors.

# It's Thanksgiving Time



**T**hanksgiving's here! It is time to eat and stuff our stomachs with yummy food. Thanksgiving and Pilgrims seem to go together like bread and butter, but the Pilgrims never really held a Thanksgiving feast. Now, before you cancel dinner read on and learn how our Thanksgiving came to be.

The Pilgrims did have a feast in 1621 after their first harvest of crops. This is the feast people often refer to as "The First Thanksgiving." This feast never happened again, and the Pilgrims would not have called it a "Thanksgiving." To the Pilgrims, a day of thanksgiving was a day of prayer and fasting, not eating!

The first harvest feast was held around the first of October and lasted three days! The pilgrims didn't have a building large enough to hold 140 people, 50 pilgrims and 90 Native Americans, so the feast was held outside.

Do you think the pilgrims and Native Americans ate the same foods we eat today? Some were the same. They ate deer, fish, wild turkeys, ducks, geese and other birds. They also ate Indian corn, wheat and berries. Do you think they ate corn of the cob? No, corn on the cob was not eaten.

Indian corn was only good for making cornmeal. What about ham or sweet potatoes? Nope, the Pilgrims didn't have pigs, and sweet potatoes hadn't been brought to New England yet. They did have cranberries, but they did not have sugar to make cranberry sauce. Do you think they ate pumpkin pie? Pilgrims did have pumpkins. They most likely made a pumpkin pudding sweetened with honey or maple syrup, but their pudding would not have had a crust.

The Pilgrim's feast was different from ours, but it became the model for our Thanksgiving of today. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made the last Thursday in November a national holiday of Thanksgiving. Up to that time, no permanent holiday had been set. President Roosevelt changed the day of Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday in November in 1941, and this is when we celebrate Thanksgiving today.

Wow! Who would have thought all this could have evolved out of a harvest feast?

# Be Outside!

Fall is a great time to be outside! When the leaves fall off the trees, you can take a walk and look for all the bird nests that were hidden by the leaves. If you find a nest within easy reach, take a closer look. What is it made out of? Is it tightly woven or kind of messy? How big is it and what kind of bird do you think used it? Could you make a nest? Make a map of where you find nests. Check on them through the fall and winter to see if they last until spring.

Squirrels also make nests that are easier to see when the leaves fall. Squirrel nests are called dreys. They look like a messy bunch of leaves and sticks stuck high up in a tree. The presence of dried leaves will tell you that the nest belongs to a squirrel instead of a bird. Squirrels often have several dreys in their territory.

If you have wild turkeys living in your area, make a turkey call. Turkeys make nearly 24 different kinds of calls from gobbles, to yelps, to purrs, and cackles. You will need a plastic film canister or plastic drinking cup, and a coffee stirrer or other kind of small strong straw. Carefully drill or punch a small hole in the end of the canister or cup. You want the hole to be about the same size as the straw. Push the straw or stirrer through the hole. You can make sounds by moving the straw up and down. Experiment with your call to see how to best make sounds. If there is not a turkey hunting season going on, take your call outdoors and see if you can call a wild turkey. You will have to be patient, but who knows? Before you know it, you might be “talkin’ turkey!”



**BE OUTSIDE**  
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE



# Turkey Word Search

N M E G A G P D Q R N G X W X  
O R I I A M Q O R T N S M O N  
N E A H R L L G U I B S R R S  
N S N H F R L N V L O P C S T  
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F E Q V C O U R T S H I P S R  
P F L P S S C G T O M F Q B P

CALLS  
CAMOUFLAGE  
COURTSHIP  
CRYPTIC  
DOMESTICATED  
FEATHERS  
FERAL  
FLOCK  
GALLIFORMES  
GOBBLE  
GROUND NESTING  
HEN  
HUNT  
NON-NATIVE  
POULT  
PRECOCIAL  
THANKSGIVING  
TOM  
WILD  
WORSHIPPED

## WILDLIFE EXPRESS

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