

# Wildlife Express!

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## WILD TURKEY



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*



# THE TURKEY FAMILY



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

Turkeys are part of a large group of birds known as the galliformes (GAL-a-forms). Almost 220 different species 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. These feathers help camouflage them. While they all can fly, they prefer to use their legs to get around. In fact, their pectoral or flight muscles are made of muscle fibers

that are best for short bursts of speed. So, they usually only fly when startled or when going to 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 plopping noises. Males of some species do this by themselves to attract a mate. Others gather together in an open area called a “lek” (LEK) to perform. Idaho’s sage grouse has one of the most incredible 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 nest 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.

## 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 1500’s 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 American Indians.



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

Wild Turkeys are one of our largest wild birds. They stand 43 – 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 tom’s bare skin is colorful, with a white forehead, blue face and red neck. In the spring, these colors become very bright, and are part of the male’s breeding display.

Hens lay their eggs in a shallow nest on the ground. The eggs are tan with tiny reddish spots. They will be incubated by the hen for about 25 days. Baby turkeys are called “poults.” Poults are “precocial” (pre-CO-shall). This means that they are born with downy feathers 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 as she brings them 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 for the night.

Are there wild turkeys in your area?

## IDAHO NON-NATIVES

When you start learning about wildlife, you might hear about “native” animals and “non-native” animals. A native animal is one that has always been found in a certain place. Those places can be a state, country or continent. For example, elk are native to Idaho, the United States, and North America. But an elk would not be native to South America. A three-toed sloth that is native to South America would not be native to North America, the United States, or Idaho. Sometimes, animals can be introduced to a place and survive just fine. They are called “non-natives.”



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

Idaho’s wild turkeys are non-native wildlife. Idaho never had turkeys until they were introduced in 1961 by wildlife managers. Introductions of non-native wildlife into many states were done to provide hunting opportunities. This is why turkeys were introduced into Idaho. Over time, the turkeys did very well. Some of these birds are now trapped and moved to different parts of Idaho to start new populations. Idaho has enough turkeys for hunters to enjoy a hunting season without harming the turkey population.

Of Idaho’s 13 species of game birds (birds that are hunted), six are non-native species. These include northern bobwhite quail, chukar, ring-necked pheasant, gray partridge, Gambel’s Quail, and wild turkey. Some such as the Gambel’s Quail are found only in a very small area. Others, like chukar, have done very well in the right habitat. What helps these animals survive is introducing them to habitat that is the same as the place where they are native species. Chukar are from the Middle East. They are adapted to a hot dry climate. Here in Idaho, they have done very well in the parts of the state that are usually hot and dry.

When wildlife managers introduce a non-native species, they have to be very careful. They don’t want the non-native species to be bad for native species. Imagine if a non-native species ate all the food a native species needed? Or took all the nesting sites? Or brought a disease that could kill native wildlife? Bad news! These kinds of things have happened. Sometimes the result is so bad that native wildlife become extinct. A lot of thought goes into the decision to introduce a non-native species into a new place.



# 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 or not the animal is around people. 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, if your feeders become empty, the birds will simply move on and find food someplace else. They are not depending on you to provide food.



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

The same goes for a bird that uses a nestbox that a person put up. If the nestbox disappears, the birds will find another place to nest like a cavity in a tree. They are not depending upon you to provide shelter. Bird feeders and nestboxes are good examples of things we do to help wild animals. Helping wildlife can be very important especially during severe weather or when habitat is lost. But these wild animals are still able to take care of themselves which keeps them wild.

# WHAT'S DOMESTICATED?



*Photo Courtesy Deb Baker*

A domesticated animal is an animal that depends upon people to survive. Think about your pet. You provide food, water, shelter, veterinary care, and love to your pet. For many pet owners, their pet is an important member of the family. 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 domesticated animals came from wild animals at some time. Dogs were domesticated from wolves nearly 15,000 – 20,000 years ago. Cattle are thought to have been domesticated 6,000 – 7,000 years ago. Horses were domesticated more recently. Animals were domesticated to help people by providing food, protection, company, transportation, and help with heavy tasks. Imagine farmers several hundred years ago having to plow large fields without the help of a team 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 a domesticated animal that can become feral. These animals act like wild animals. They catch their own food and stay away from people. Unlike wild animals, most house cats would not normally live in the wild.

# NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

Turkeys and their relatives are colored a lot like their habitat. This helps them blend in and not be seen. They have what is called “cryptic” coloration. This is coloration that allows an animal to match its surroundings.

When you think about wildlife, what colors come to mind? You might think of brown, tan, buff, gray, black and white, but not orange, red, purple, yellow and blue. 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. Or we 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. 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 old feathers and become cryptically colored. Bright colors can also be a warning that some critters taste bad or can sting. Predators learn to avoid these bright colors.



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

# SHOWING OFF FOR THE GIRLS



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

The breeding season is an important time for wildlife. The birth of young animals allows populations to stay healthy. Populations also stay strong because the

strongest parents pass on their good characteristics to their babies. 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 her 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. Colorful vocal sacs on the neck allow males of many species to make sounds. Often, these sounds can be heard up to a mile away. Feather displays like fanning a tail or wing drooping to make the male look larger are common. Some species are well known for dancing by stomping their feet on the ground. Put these all together, and you have a very impressive display for the females.

Other birds have interesting courtship behaviors. The tiny black-chinned hummingbird courts females by flying up and down in a big “U” shape. They may dive 65 – 100 feet during one of these courtship rituals. The male harrier, a bird of prey that lives in Idaho, performs rolls in the sky over a half-mile area.

A favorite courtship display is that of the ruffed grouse. The male does something called “drumming.” He stands on a log and then beats his wings as fast as possible. The result is a drumming sound that you almost feel instead of hear. Listen for the courting of the ruffed grouse in Idaho's forests this spring.

# TURKEYS AND MAN

When we think of turkey, it is usually as Thanksgiving dinner. Turkeys have been a very important source of food for people for a long time. Indians, in what is now Mexico, first domesticated turkeys long before explorers arrived in the 1500s. American Indians also used wild turkeys for food. Turkeys were also used for many other things by native peoples living in North America.

Long before we knew much about the weather, the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico noticed that the spring rains came when the turkeys were doing their courtship display. 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 danced today as part of special ceremonies each spring.

Turkey feathers were important as decorations. They were used to make the head-dresses of a number of tribes living in the eastern United States. 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 things such as beads, sewing needles, and hairpins. Some native people used turkey wingbones to make calls to attract male turkeys. This 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.” Imagine, we could have had a turkey on our money instead of an eagle! And the Apollo astronauts landing on the moon for the very first time might have said “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.

Happy Thanksgiving!

# TURKEY PARTS

When you think about turkey, you might just think about wings and drumsticks. What about beards, spurs, snoods, and caruncles? All of these are turkey parts that have to do with courtship. All male turkeys and a few hens have a beard. It is made up of modified feathers that grow out from under the breast feathers. Spurs are like claws, and there is one on each leg. If a tom turkey gets into a fight with another tom, he will use his spurs to scratch his opponent. Caruncles are fleshy bumps like warts on the turkey’s face. The snood is a fleshy flap that hangs over the beak. During courtship, the snood can be inflated sort of like a balloon. This helps make the tom look very handsome and impressive; at least if you are a hen turkey!

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## *Turkey Parts Puzzle Answers Below*

A. Beard  
B. Spur  
C. Caruncles  
D. Head Crown  
E. Snood  
F. Breast Feathers  
G. Tail Feathers  
H. Wing Feathers

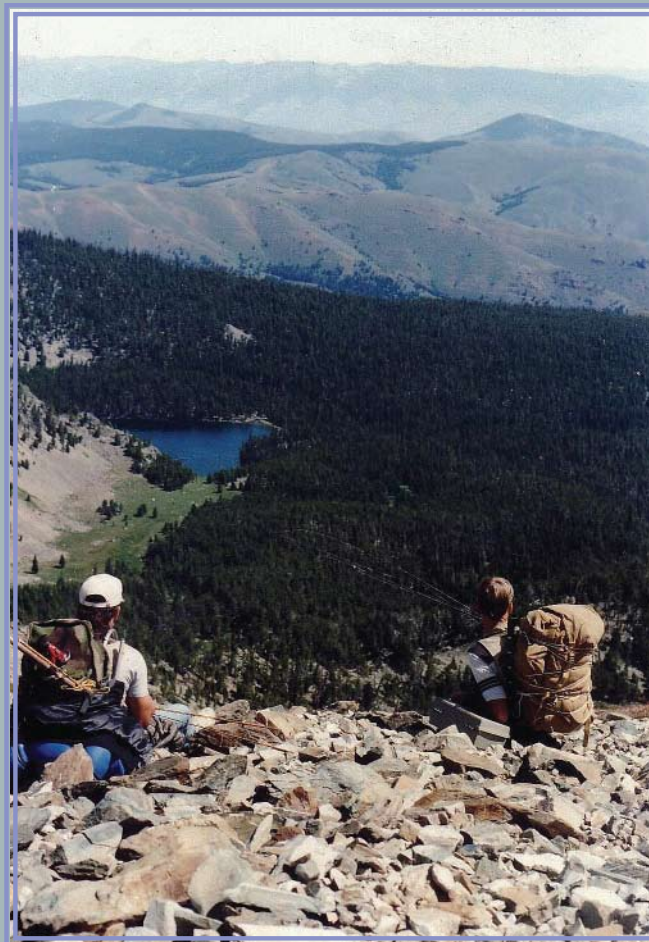


# BE OUTSIDE!

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 materials would be used to make it? 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 and you can look for their nests too. Squirrel nests are called “dreys.” They will 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.

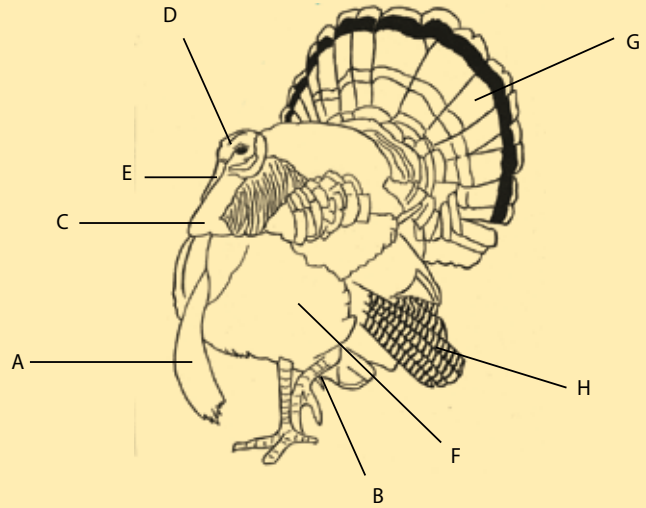
Here’s another idea. Turkeys make nearly 24 different kinds of calls from gobbles, to yelps, to purrs, and cackles. If you have wild turkeys living in your area, make a turkey call. You will need a plastic film canister and a coffee stirrer or other kind of small strong straw. Carefully drill or punch a small hole in the end of the canister. 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!”



*Photo Courtesy IDFG*

Use the Key words below to label the turkey parts:

**Beard**  
**Breast feathers**  
**Caruncles**  
**Head crown**  
**Snood**  
**Spur**  
**Tail Feathers**  
**Wing Feathers**



Write your answers here:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

- d. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_
- f. \_\_\_\_\_
- g. \_\_\_\_\_
- h. \_\_\_\_\_

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