

Talking Turkey

S. Petersen

Lamprey Rivers Advisory Committee



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Thanksgiving is coming soon and the thoughts of many people will certainly turn to turkey, the main course. Turkey, however, is much more than meat. Turkeys are fascinating birds and they deserve a closer look. Ben Franklin thought so. He proposed that the wild turkey be the symbol of the United States.

Wild turkeys were abundant in America long before people arrived. The spread and growth of human populations coincided with a decline in the number of turkeys due to hunting and loss of habitat. When wildlife professionals recognized this loss, they made a concerted effort to increase turkey numbers. That effort has worked and once-threatened turkeys are again abundant.

Turkeys are masters of their habitat. Unlike domestic turkeys, wild turkeys are lean, powerful, and fast. They spend most of their time on the ground foraging for fruits, insects, salamanders, and nuts. They have excellent vision and hearing. When necessary, they can outrun or fly away from many of their enemies. At night, they fly up into trees to roost. They roam widely and can seem to vanish into their surroundings.

Turkeys are unique in many ways. They have a variety of vocalizations; they purr, yelp, cluck, cackle, rattle, and gobble. Male turkeys, toms, put on one of nature's most audacious displays to attract females. Toms' facial anatomy includes a dewlap (fleshy growth hanging under the chin), caruncles (growths located on the side and front of neck), and a snood (a fleshy projection rising above the bill). The skin on their heads ranges from light blue/pink to red, depending on their mood. They also have a "beard" that dangles from the chest. Females can find the tom's features and show tempting, but they also have the ability to produce fertile eggs without actually having any contact with a tom. This ability, parthenogenesis, is rare in nature. Interestingly, baby turkeys that are the result of parthenogenesis are male and they grow into fertile toms.

Turkeys are intelligent, strong birds. Sadly, they have sometimes gotten an unfair reputation as foolish or inept. They also face the distinct problem of having heads that many people find to be homely. Don't be fooled by appearances. When we speak frankly, discuss hard facts, or get down to serious business, we are talking turkey. Ben Franklin was right; turkeys are really cool, seriously.