

School-to-Nature



Wild Turkey

Wild Turkeys are natives of the Americas. They were introduced to Asia and Europe by Spanish explorers, who brought them back by ship in the 1500s. They were called “turkeys” in Europe because most were imported from Asia back then, and they passed through the country of Turkey.

A male wild turkey, called a “gobbler” or “tom,” is 3 to 3.5 feet tall. The female, called a “hen,” is 2.5 to 3 feet tall. They have a wingspan of about 4 feet, and they can fly and perch in trees. The male weighs 18-24 pounds, the female 8-12 pounds. Their life expectancy in the wild is 3-4 years.

Wild turkeys have gray and brown feathers of several shades. The tom turkey has a fan tail that can be spread out and displayed, and a red wattle below the chin. The female does not have these.

They create a flock, a larger group of turkeys, and the flock will have a territory that they defend. They eat insects, small reptiles like young snakes, amphibians such as salamanders, vegetation, berries, nuts, and seeds.

Turkeys nest in spring, laying 10-12 eggs in a depression in the dirt, and eggs hatch about a month later. Nestlings (called poults) are ready to forage with the mother almost from the first day. Predators to the nestlings are opossums, raccoons, skunks, foxes, raptors and groundhogs. Adults may be preyed on by coyotes, eagles, great horned owls, dogs and foxes.

Ben Franklin admired wild turkeys for their independence and their defense of their territories. He wanted the wild turkey to be our National Bird; but the Bald Eagle won out.

They are one of only two birds, native to North America, that have been domesticated. The other bird is the Muscovy Duck. Wild turkeys were first domesticated by the Native Americans. Europeans were actually very surprised to see wild turkeys when they arrived to colonize America.

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