

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Look for it now in Southwest Ohio!



Eastern Wild Turkey by Dave Woehr



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Wild Turkey Hen and Nest by PutneyPics (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

By John Pohlman, Ohio Certified Volunteer Naturalist

Wild turkeys are fascinating birds that capture our attention and earn our admiration, and they are a success story in the United States, with a long history as birds native to North America. The wild turkey is a large, upland bird native to North America. It is the ancestor to the domestic turkey, which was originally domesticated in southern Mexico. Wild turkeys now populate most of the United States, and a few parts of southern Canada and central Mexico. Wild turkeys typically live in mature hardwood forests, where nut trees are interspersed with edges and fields. They travel in flocks, scratching out nuts, berries, insects, and snails to eat. In early spring, Toms (males) gather in clearings to perform courtship displays, puffing up their body feathers and tails into a fan, strutting while giving their characteristic “gobbler call.”

In the early days of the American Republic, Benjamin Franklin was appointed to a committee to choose appropriate political symbols—among them a national bird. The wild turkey was never really a contender, as widely believed, but Franklin later expressed his preference for the turkey over the bald eagle in a letter that he wrote to his daughter in 1784.

In the early 1900’s wild turkey numbers dwindled from overhunting and the lack of game control practices. By the 1940’s, wildlife and conservation experts began catching wild turkeys and transporting them to suitable habitats. With hunting regulations now in place, this allowed wild turkeys to propagate and spread to all of the lower 48 states again. The North American wild turkey population is now estimated at about 7 million birds, with about 200,000 of those in Ohio.

Named after the country of Turkey, because of their “exotic and rare” appearance while being delivered to Asian markets by European merchants, wild turkeys can swim and have exceptional eyesight. They have several different calls, but only male wild turkeys can “gobble.” When scouting, the sex of a wild turkey can be determined by its scat (poop); a male’s is shaped like the letter “J,” and the female’s is more spiral shaped. Wild turkeys also grow snoods, the red flesh that hangs over its beak. According to *The Journal of Avian Biology*, females prefer males with longer snoods, and snood length can also be used to predict the winner of a competition between two males! At night, turkeys fly up into trees to roost in groups. (Yes, they can fly!) Finally, a wild turkey has a “beard,” a tassel that dangles from a Tom’s breast and looks like a miniature horsetail. Toms begin growing a beard when they are about five months old, growing about four inches yearly.

I have seen wild turkeys on my property and surrounds in Turtlecreek Township, but not in concentrated numbers. They tend to be spotty, but they are always welcome to visit! I hope you have the opportunity to observe the beautiful wild turkey out in the wild, too. To learn more about this species, visit [page 9 of Ohio Division of Wildlife’s Common Birds of Ohio Field Guide](#).