

A Sportsman's Spring

by Jess Rice

Most people begin to observe the signs of spring. Spring frogs sing their sweet chorus, daffodils show their lovely petals, redbuds and dogwoods provide a sensational pop of color in the landscape just beginning to turn green and songbirds serenade throughout the day. We hang hummingbird feeders and begin to plan our vegetable gardens. "Spring has sprung," we say with a blissful smile.



Simultaneously, sportspeople everywhere are downtrodden, mourning the end of deer and waterfowl seasons. We are reliving the big bucks that got away, counting down the days until it's time to start checking trail cameras again. Visions of green heads and speckled bellies flying overhead consume our thoughts.



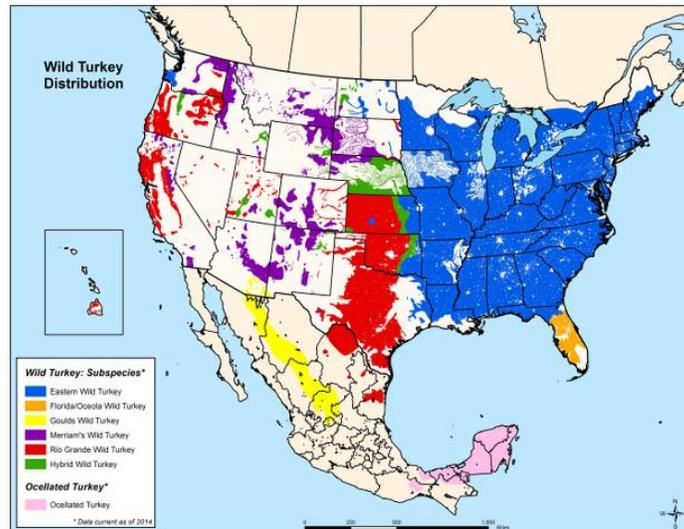
In outdoor social media groups everywhere, the signs of spring are quite different. Shed hunting, a popular way to pass the time while we anxiously await the start of turkey season, ramps up. Pictures showcasing limits of ducks are replaced by those of trophy antlers and deadheads found while wandering in the woods. Interwoven are photos of hog sized Crappie, limits of slabs landed in a matter of minutes and trophy hauls of Morel mushrooms. We post game camera footage of strutting longbeards attempting to impress groups of hens.

Talk turns to turkey calling or spit-balling about how bad the ticks will be this year, and finally it arrives -- spring opening day.

Turkey hunting is a long-loved tradition among hunters. It's a hunt steeped in reward, a chance to outsmart an animal with some of the most precise vision in North America. The Wild Turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*, was once nearly extirpated from this continent. At the lowest point, wild turkeys in the U.S. numbered near 1.3 million. Largely due to the efforts of the National Wild Turkey Federation, turkey populations have been restored to nearly 7 million birds in 49 states.



There are six subspecies of North American turkeys (see figure below), each with its own beautiful feather pattern and unique set of characteristics that entice hunters far and wide to complete a World Slam. The most hunted subspecies is the Eastern wild turkey, the largest and most widespread of the turkeys. In contrast to the Rio Grande wild turkey, which is native to the central plains states, Easterns are far more call shy. Naturally they are not very vocal birds, so hunting them can often be more challenging. Objectively, the most beautiful subspecies comes from the Yucatan Peninsula-- the ocellated turkey. With a tail fan boasting a pattern similar to that of a peacock, and colors to rival a tropical parrot, Central American ocellated turkeys are certainly a sight to behold.



Distribution of Wild Turkeys by subspecies in North America.
©National Wild Turkey Federation.

To observe the courting behavior of a tom turkey is the greatest allure to the hunt. Hearing him call to locate a hen, listening to the drum of the wing feathers as they fan out toward the ground, watching him strut to get her attention. It's magical, and immediately reinvigorates a sportsman's enthusiasm for hunting the animal. Wild turkeys are a dynamite quarry for a first-time hunter--below are 5 reasons why it's worth your time to take someone turkey hunting this spring!

1. The season is typically rather long.

Many states offer both a spring and fall season, allowing a newbie to have multiple opportunities in a year.

2. Spring is a wonderful time of year to be outdoors.

First timers will have mild weather for their first sit, giving them an ability to gauge how well they might enjoy a longer sit in less favorable conditions—like deer season.

3. Calling provides you with a location of your prey.

You make a yelp, purr or cluck that's answered, letting you know it's game on. Once you've got a bird talking, the non-stop excitement is much different than waiting for a deer to show up.

4. Complete stillness is not always necessary.

Let's face it, being absolute still for hours on end can be difficult. Here you may find yourself 'running and gunning' as they call it, trying to get closer without being seen which always keeps the heart pounding!

5. A ton of equipment is not required.

Fewer gear requirements means less investment up front, which gives the new hunter an opportunity to try before you buy. You need a shotgun, any type of camouflage that breaks up your silhouette, a call and a method of concealment.