
Wild Turkeys

In many eastern states, wild turkeys are becoming a nuisance species due to the abundance of feed, both natural and human-provided, and lack of predators. This is compounded by the intentional introduction of escaped pen-raised turkeys and hybrid wild turkeys. This is not the case in Arizona where wild turkeys continue to be elusive, feed on wild foods, and rely on suitable habitat provided by native ecosystems.

Arizona has three subspecies of wild turkeys: Merriam's, Gould's, and Rio Grande's. Merriam's turkey is a native species that can be found throughout the western United States, primarily in the ponderosa pine forests of Colorado, New Mexico, and northern Arizona. Gould's turkey is also a native species and is only found in Arizona and New Mexico, primarily in the mountain ranges near the U.S./Mexico border and in the mountains of northern Mexico. Rio Grande turkeys are native to Texas and Mexico to the south and were recently introduced in Arizona on the Arizona Strip, a geographically isolated area north of the Colorado River in the northwestern area of the state.

Wild turkey's preferred ecosystems include ponderosa pine forests, riparian areas, and southeastern Arizona's "sky islands". While these areas are preferred, wild turkey's can be found in other vegetation types between elevations 3,500 and 10,000 feet. Water availability is a key habitat characteristic. Insects, young green plants, and mast (nuts and seeds from the forest floor) are preferred foods.

In the spring, two year-old and older males (toms) weigh about 18 pounds on average, and yearling males or "jakes" weigh about 13 pounds. Hens more than a year old weigh between 8 and 12 pounds. As springtime temperatures warm, the tom turkeys start to gobble, strut, and spit signaling the start of breeding season. After mating, hens often continue upslope into denser habitats to lay and incubate their eggs. Hens mate once per year and lay between 8 and 12 eggs that take 28 days to incubate. The young are precocial (relatively mature and mobile) and move from the nest soon after hatching.

Toms and hens are not usually seen together during the remainder of the year although both frequent similar habitats. During the summer months, the hens and poult (young turkeys) spend much of their time searching for bugs and seeds in small meadows and forest openings. In early winter, turkeys feed increasingly on acorns, pinyon nuts, and other mast crops. Later, the birds follow pine stringers downslope to snow-free areas where they feed on the seeds of ponderosa pine, junipers, pinyons, and other plants.

Wild turkeys are hunted as a big game species in Arizona and these hunts are regulated by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD). Wild turkey management is often done in partnership with AGFD working in partnerships with locally-based conservation groups such as the National Wild Turkey Federation along with land management agencies.

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