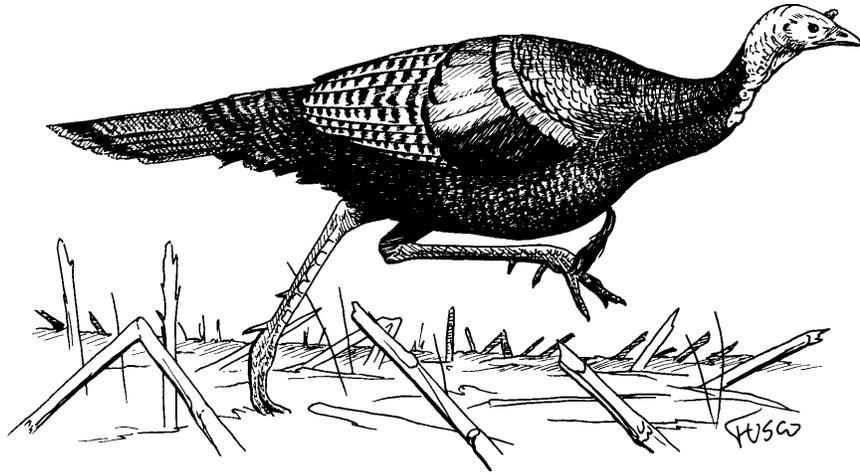


# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### WILD TURKEY

*Meleagris gallopavo*



**Habitat:** A mixture of mature hardwood forests and open fields.

**Weight:** Adult male: 15 to 25 pounds; adult female: 8 to 12 pounds.

**Length:** Adult male: 48 inches; adult female: 36 inches.

**Food:** Acorns and other mast (hard fruit), fleshy fruits, corn, a variety of seeds, and invertebrates. Young turkeys (particularly) feed heavily on insects.

**Identification:** The eastern wild turkey is a large, majestic bird. Males or "toms" are dark in coloration with iridescent feathers. They have a fleshy, unfeathered head that is brightly-colored in red, white, and blue, especially during the mating season. The toms also have spurs (up to 1.5 inches in length) on their legs, and a hair-like beard (up to 12 inches long) protruding from their breast.

The female turkey (hen) is lighter in coloration (brown and buff colored); she lacks spurs and the head has a pale blue color. Although uncommon, a small percentage of the hens will have a beard.

**Range:** In the United States, five subspecies of wild turkey inhabit 49 states except Alaska. The subspecies which exists in Connecticut, *Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*, ranges from southern Maine to northern Florida, west to eastern Texas and north to North Dakota.

**Reproduction:** The breeding season starts in late March and early April when the toms begin gobbling and displaying for the hens. Turkeys are considered polygamous breeders, as toms will mate with many hens

and hens may breed with more than one tom. Males establish a pecking order of dominance, and the most dominant male may breed most of the hens in an area. Hens lay a clutch of eight to 14 eggs at the rate of about one egg per day; they are incubated for 28 days beginning when the final egg is laid. Once hatched, the poults will remain with the hen throughout the summer, fall, and winter. In late summer, hens with their broods, join up to form flocks. Flocks of up to 100 birds have been reported in Connecticut, but commonly the flocks number from 10 to 20 birds. On occasion, adult toms will join the flock, but more often will form groups of their own or travel as individuals.

**History in Connecticut:** Wild turkeys were abundant in Connecticut when the first settlers arrived. However, a combination of forest clearing, unregulated hunting, and a series of severe winters eliminated the turkey from Connecticut by the early 1800s. In the 1950s and 1960s attempts at wild turkey restoration through artificial propagation were largely unsuccessful. The major breakthrough in restoration efforts occurred when free-roaming wild turkeys were live-captured and translocated

using the rocket net, a large, lightweight net which is carried over baited birds by rockets fired from a remote blind. Between 1975 and 1992, 356 wild turkeys were released at 18 sites throughout the state. These releases and subsequent population expansion have resulted in the successful restoration of wild turkeys to all 169 Connecticut towns. Recent land use practices in Connecticut have also favored the expansion of wild turkey populations as the land is once again returning to forest. As a result of restoration efforts and the increase in forest habitat, sportsmen have been able to hunt wild turkey since 1981, and landowners and others have enjoyed observing them in their natural state.

**Interesting facts:** Turkeys frequently can be seen foraging in the fields that border forestland.

A wild turkey may range over several square miles in one day. The tracks of an adult tom are six to seven inches long; adult hen tracks are four and one-half to five inches long.

The wild turkey fares better in less-disturbed areas; however, in some areas of dense human populations, where food and cover are plentiful, turkeys have adapted and seem to survive well. Few predators are able to catch an adult wild turkey. Their well developed instinct for survival and excellent eyesight and hearing help to keep them out of harm's way. Hens on the nest, as well as poults during their first few weeks of life, are most vulnerable to predation. Free-ranging domestic dogs can severely reduce nesting success in populated areas.

**Management:** A Connecticut regulation prohibits individuals from releasing any turkey into the wild. Releasing pen-raised wild turkeys will only serve to jeopardize the expansion and survival of the existing wild turkey population. Birds raised in captivity are host to a reservoir of diseases and are of a poorer genetic strain. They also do not possess the instincts to survive in the wild. It is also recommended not to feed wild turkeys, as

this encourages the spread of disease and loss of wild instincts.

Thanks to the restoration program involving the trap and transfer of wild turkeys throughout the state, Connecticut now has a healthy, growing population of wild turkeys. In addition, Connecticut has assisted other states with wild turkey restoration efforts. Between 1987 and 1997, Connecticut has provided 188 birds to other states including: Maine (101), Louisiana (17), North Carolina (51), and Texas (19).

Landowners can help to encourage and maintain our wild turkey population through various wildlife habitat improvements:

1. Leave a high percentage of mature (14 -inch diameter or larger) mast-producing trees such as oak, hickory, beech, and ash.
2. Create small, irregular-shaped one to three acre forest openings isolated from roads and houses. The brush in these openings should be cut every one to three years, preferably in late summer; at this time there is little chance of disturbing a nest.
3. Encourage grape vines, hawthorn trees, juniper bushes, and winterberry to produce food and cover. Various wildlife shrubs are available through the DEP State Nursery in Voluntown.
4. It is beneficial to leave a few edge rows of corn (preferably in isolated areas) as a winter food source.
5. Leave clumps of conifers for cover such as hemlock or white pine. As a general rule, the best turkey habitat consists of 50 to 75 percent forestland with half of this in mature hardwood and 10 percent in conifers. An average of 10 to 40 percent of the land should be in openings such as old, abandoned fields, or agricultural areas.



*The Technical Assistance Informational Series is 75 percent funded by Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration—the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Program. The P-R Program provides funding through an excise tax on the sale of sporting firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. The remaining 25 percent of the funding is matched by the Connecticut Wildlife Division.*