

# Wild Turkey

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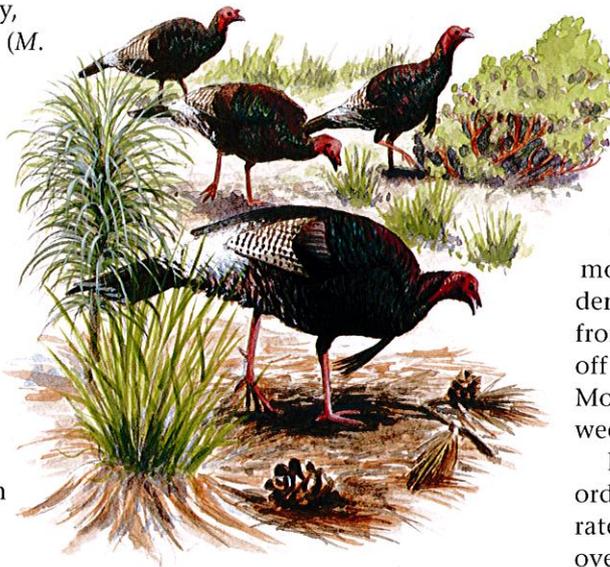
**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Meleagris gallopavo*. *Meleagris*, from the Greek name for guinea, an African fowl, applied in error by Belon, a French naturalist, perhaps reflecting confusion over the bird's origins. The specific epithet is from the Latin *gallo* and *pavo* meaning (respectively) cock and peafowl. Of the six subspecies of wild turkey, two are native to Arizona: Gould's (*M. g. mexicana*) and Merriam's (*M. g. merriami*). The former was named for the country that encompasses most of its range. It is popularly called Gould's since it was named by British artist John Gould, who discovered it in 1856. Merriam's turkey was named in honor of C. Hart Merriam, chief of the U.S. Biological Survey at the turn of the 19th century.

**DESCRIPTION:** Wild turkeys are squatly configured, especially when viewed with their 5,000 to 6,000 body feathers fluffed and the tail feathers spectacularly fanned. Older males weigh 15-20 pounds; females just 9-12. They weigh much less, have longer legs and necks, a more slender body, a smaller head, and duller plumage than their domestic cousins. Males have bronze to blue-green, iridescent body plumage, with back-tipped chest feathers, a tuft of modified feathers known as a "beard," and spurs on their legs. The drab (brown) hens sometimes have spurs or beards, but they are much smaller than a male's. In the spring, the male's unfeathered head is a colorful red and white. Any differences in appearance between Merriam's and Gould's are inconstant and indistinguishable in the field.

**HABITAT:** Gould's turkey inhabits Madrean evergreen woodlands (pinon and pine-oak), and adjacent pine

and riparian forests. Merriam's typically inhabits ponderosa pine forest.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Today, one or more of the six subspecies of wild turkeys occurs in all states except Alaska, and throughout Mexico, where a sibling



species, the ocellated turkey, lives. In the 1950s, Arizona Game and Fish released Merriam's throughout southern Arizona. The last known individual was removed in 1981, but Merriam's still occurs from central Arizona across the northern plateaus. Gould's turkey occurred historically in southern Arizona, but was extirpated by the 1920s. In 1983 and 1987, individuals from Chihuahua, Mexico, were released in Arizona's Huachuca Mountains. The population took off after six to eight years, so more Gould's were captured in 1994 and 1996 in Sonora, Mexico, and released in the Galiuro Mountains.

**BIOLOGY:** Wild turkeys breed in spring, when the male's loud and explosive gobble alerts other males, females, and hunters to his presence. Gobbling may

continue into June, but egg laying starts in March-April. Clutches range from 8-12 eggs; incubation lasts about 28 days. All the eggs hatch on the same day. The young (poults) can move from the nest almost immediately upon hatching. Poults summer with hens, foraging, loafing, and sleeping. Wild turkeys feed predominately on herbs, shrubs, acorns and other nuts, fruits, and seeds. The diet varies seasonally.

Wild turkeys move in response to weather. Snowfall drives them down in elevation; warm weather allows them to move up. Night roosts are usually in dense vegetation, to provide security from mammals and raptors that pick off the unwary, especially the young. Mortality is highest in the first six weeks; survivors are very wary.

Flocks are segregated by pecking order. Males and females have separate hierarchies. Home ranges may overlap broadly. Only the immediate area of presence is defended against another flock or another individual—thus, the pecking order.

**STATUS:** The wild turkey is not on the Department's list of *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona*, nor is it being considered for federal listing. In fact, the wild turkey is among America's greatest conservation success stories. The U.S. population had been reduced to perhaps 30,000 by 1900, and now it totals perhaps five million birds.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** To carry on with habitat management and restoration and continue the reintroduction of Gould's turkey in southern Arizona. ♣

Terry B. Johnson, chief, Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program, gives thanks for turkeys every Thanksgiving.