

Arizona Wildlife Podcast

Transcript: Episode 13 – A Year in the Life of a Turkey

(Please note: this podcast was recorded live from a public presentation. It was not a rehearsed speech. This transcript attempts to capture the dialogue as it was spoken. At times when the speech was difficult to hear or understand, a good effort was made. These rare cases are noted in the text.)

The content for this episode came from a public speaking engagement at the Arizona Game and Fish Headquarters in Phoenix on November 6, 2008. The topic of the talk was turkeys in Arizona.

Listen as Brian Wakeling, big game program supervisor for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, outlines the first year of life for the average turkey in the state. Following the presentation, the audio was edited for flow to improve understanding.

BRIAN:

Recapping what a...what a year looks like to a turkey. They start out, I mean these guys are really small. A turkey egg doesn't look much different from a chicken egg. It's a little bit bigger. If you've ever seen a domestic turkey egg, it's brown, kind of brown spotted, real small little dots. That's exactly what a wild turkey egg looks like. They're what they call precocial; they don't take a whole lot of nursing; they hit the ground running; leave the nest within 24 hours. Within about 2-4 weeks they can fly. But during that 2-4 weeks – typically they hatch somewhere between late May, early June – they'll be, um, on the ground for those 2-4 weeks at night. The hen will brood them at night.

This is the time of year when you hear people talk about how turkeys will drown in the rain; they're too dumb; they just stick their head up and they drown in the rain. Well, that's not exactly true as is with most stories. Uh, this is the time of year when they're actually...have the highest protein demands of their life. And so, they're taken to places like little openings, herbaceous areas where there's a lot of invertebrates, a lot of insects and bugs. And they like eating bugs. They'll eat bugs like crazy because they're real high in protein. But at that point in time, you've also got the, uh, that little green growth, that fresh green growth which is also real high in energy, uh, real high in nitrogen and protein. So, they're eating that stuff too. They've got to eat that stuff; they've got to keep going.

If you look at these guys right now they don't have any...any good feathers. They're just real downy little things. And so they don't thermoregulate very well. So, as it starts to rain, they get wet. Which means they start to lose their body temperature, their inability to...to thermoregulate. They start to develop hypothermia. And so they have to keep eating in order to keep warm. And so the more they eat, they're still getting wet. We have spring storms in June – that can be one of the worst things for turkey reproduction. We wind up losing turkeys during that time frame.

But as you go through the rest of the summer they...they continue eating bugs. They...they continue eating grasses, forbs. And as, uh, the grass seed heads start to form, they start eating grass seed heads. And so you'll see them in places, uh, where they can take advantage of that.

As you start to move into the fall, that can be one of the times of the year when you can see some of the biggest flocks of turkeys. The hens with poults join up with other hens with poults and they're, especially in a year like this year, I've heard a number of reports of big flocks of turkeys, uh, largely because this has

been a pretty good acorn year. The oaks have made a really good mast crop and they're in the acorns. So acorns tend not to be widely distributed but if you...it's really plentiful in localized areas, and so you wind up with larger flocks of turkeys in there.

As you start to move into the wintertime, they tend to be really reliant on the left-over acorns, and they also start to take advantage of ponderosa pine seed, pinyon pine seed, and just about every turkey in Arizona is going to be someplace where they're going to have access to juniper berries during the winter months. Juniper berries are probably an awful lot like celery. It's something that will fill you up; it'll make you feel like you're eating, but I don't believe they've got a whole lot of nutritional value for turkeys. But it's a real regular producer and it's available in most of the places, uh, where...where turkeys will winter.

Turkeys tend to winter, in most places in the state, below 7000 feet, and during the summer they'll be above 7000 feet. Just kind of a rule of thumb. They'll be down in that lower country year-long, but you'll start...you'll have some pretty good movements, uh, we saw turkeys using somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy square miles over the course of a year just because they had so much room to, uh, range across, especially in that country up there on...north of the Mogollon Rim, because it all slopes off to the north and it does so real gently.

Did you have a question?

PARTICIPANT:

Well, kind of with the...I've seen them in Seven Springs area before in the summertime too.

BRIAN:

Yeah.

PARTICIPANT:

And I was shocked when I saw that.

BRIAN:

Yeah, they will be at some...some pretty low elevations. It does happen. You know, there's turkeys that'll live out in those kind of areas and they'll stay there year-long. But if you're up in, you know, your traditional turkey habitat, you do tend to see more of them above 7000 feet. They'll move up there during the summertime. But you're absolutely right.

When we were doing our studies up at Camp Wood in the Prescott area, when we first got up there I thought, "Well, you know, there's some moderate winter range up here but I don't see a whole lot of summer range." And the stuff I thought they'd use in the winter was the highest elevation stuff that was up there. Right around...a little over 6000 feet. And that's where they were in the wintertime. But in the summertime, they'd drop to the lower elevations. They'd use those ponderosa pine stringers that went out into the grassland, and that's where they'd nest, and that's where they'd spend time raising their young. And then they...as the fall progressed they moved up into that higher elevation. Kind of a reverse migration. But nevertheless they did have some pretty wide...wide movements.

Once they get through the, uh, wintertime, winter can be one of the hardest times. Food access is the biggest challenge. If you have a poor mast year, these guys can be really hit. And a poor mast year doesn't mean there's got to be a lot of snow.

In 1989, when I was working up on the...up on the Rim there, probably the hardest winter that I saw on these guys and it was wide open, there wasn't very much snow. But we had individual birds that we caught at the beginning of the year, uh, winter and at the end of the winter that'd lost 20% of their body weight. There just wasn't much out there to eat. They were easy to trap. We'd put bait out to get them to come in and, boy, they'd come running.

Other years, 1988, was a really wet year, there was a lot of snow, we...I couldn't catch a turkey to save my soul until just about the end of the summer, or the end of the winter because they just weren't hungry. They wouldn't come to the bait. I didn't know what the heck I was doing, just trying to get them to come in. It took a little bit of training on both our parts, but we finally got it done.

And, uh, a real light snow that's...that's maybe an inch or two inches deep, if it melts and then freezes hard, they can't get through it. But if its six or eight inches deep and soft, they can dig through that. Um, at some point, though, you know, if it gets to be about twelve inches deep and its real soft then they...they kind of start high centering and have a little bit more hard time getting around.

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Thank you.