

Arizona Wildlife Podcast

Transcript: Episode 14 – Turkey Nests and Roosts

(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, discusses nesting and roosting behaviors and characteristics for these birds. Following the presentation, the audio was edited for flow to improve understanding.

BRIAN:

We looked at probably, over the course of three or four years, somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy of these turkey nests. And they tended to have the same types of characteristics. Now, they'd always like to back up against something – a downed log, a tree. Uh, they like to be in some kind of slope. Uh, they like to have overhead cover. And they usually like to have some kind of an avenue where if somebody disturbed them, they'd be able to fly out of there and bust out pretty good.

Now the Forest Service, for quite a while, managed for slash piles. They'd always leave piles of slash laying around because when you're wandering around, oftentimes, that's where they'd encounter them. And turkeys do use them. But, it's not the primary place that they nest. They nest on typically steep slopes. Uh, we found two of the seventy that were in those slash piles. When they're moving around, when they're working in the forest, those were the kind of places that they'd encounter them. And so they think they're important. And they...it...it's certainly are used but it's not the primary place.

Turkeys also have another, uh, odd behavior with their nests, and you can look and tell whether or not it was a successful hatching nest or whether it was one that was...was destroyed by a predator. When those chicks break out, they pop the top off. They pop out, and the hen grabs that top, for whatever reason we don't know why, but she grabs it and sticks it back in there. Maybe they're neatniks. I don't know what it is. Trying to keep everything clean. But they'll...if you find a bunch of eggshells with the tops stuck back in them, it was a success...successful nest.

PARTICIPANT:

Huh.

BRIAN:

Every one of them hatched successfully.

Now turkeys, on average, will lay nine to twelve eggs. You know, I've seen nests...nests that had three. I've seen nests that have had fifteen eggs in it. But normally it's in that nine to twelve range. It takes them about two weeks to lay a nest. During that time frame they lay an egg, and then they leave the nest site. They don't stay at the nest site until they've got a full clutch of eggs. They'll lay an egg a day. So, during that time they're not protecting it, they're not incubating it. They're roosting away from the...the nest.

But they all nest on the ground. They don't do a whole lot of nest site preparation. They just kind of wallow it out or sit down there.

And so after two weeks, they usually start doing this, uh, oh, probably about the mid to late April. Sometimes they'll start as late as the first week in May. And two weeks to lay the nest. Then, they'll sit on that nest for another four weeks. So twenty-eight days of incubation. After that they typically all hatch within about a, uh, twenty-four hour period. Within twenty-four hours, they abandon the nest site. They take off. They go lead them off to, uh, to go find food.

And when we modeled habitat, the place that came out as being real important...what constitutes good nesting habitat tend to be these...these areas with steep slopes, the drainages, and some of this mixed conifer habitat at the higher elevations. Real common place for them to be...be nesting during that late April through early June timeframe.

In Arizona, yearling hens don't nest. And I don't...don't know why that is because if you go to South Dakota, Merriam's turkeys that are introduced there nest as...as yearlings nest at rates equal to adults. And so, they grow like crazy. Down here, so you get a year that, okay, there's no hens, no...no young hens. You have nothing but older hens and they all breed. Then the next year you've got a bunch of young birds coming in and so you're going to see some drop-off in the over...total nesting rate of the whole overall population because you've got a bunch of young hens that aren't nesting yet. It takes you two years to kind of recruit it.

Now the other thing that you want to look...that you're often looking for with turkeys is where are they spending the night. A lot of people who don't know much about turkeys, haven't heard much about turkeys, it kind of surprises them to find out that they sleep in trees at night but they nest on the ground. It seems a little backwards to them. But it seems to be the way it works out.

And turkeys like to roost on these upper slopes in these big over-mature trees. They like broad horizontal spreading branches. And they're always right up near the very top of tree. And they're pretty good flyers. They don't fly for very far but they can stand at the base of a tree and fly up into it. And a lot of times they like to have a little bit of an opening above them where they can fly off and get up into the tops of these trees. And then oftentimes they like another opening down here where they can fly off into those openings in the morning. It makes for a pretty good "room with a view."

They tend to go to sleep or at least fly up into the roost just about the time that it's getting good and dark. They'll be up there. A lot of times you'll think, "Hey, I wonder if they're...I wonder if it's too dark for them yet, you know." And a lot of times, they...they need it to be pretty doggone dark and then they'll fly up.

And then the other thing that largely dictates how...how...how many trees you'll have is how big the roosts are or how big the flocks are. So, as you start to get into the...the wintertime, you tend to get bigger flocks of birds kind of grouping up together. Oftentimes, because win...food sources are less...less, uh, available and you wind up with a lot bigger flocks and then they'll find bigger clumps of trees to roost in. Oftentimes there'll be seven to ten trees in the summertime. Could be as many as fifty or sixty in the wintertime depending on how big the flock is. Uh, one flock we worked with in, uh, the Camp Wood area up by Prescott, there were two hundred birds in that winter flock. It was deafening at night. They'd come in and there were like four or five flocks and it was like the only roost they could find. And they'd all come in together and they'd...there'd be chasing each other around and screaming and, you know, yelling and all kinds of turkey noises. And then they start flying up into the trees. Well, it seemed to be a bad deal to be the first one in the tree. Because they'd all go up on the roost...or up on the...on the ridge behind

the roost and fly in. And as they were flying in, it was like playing billiards with turkeys. If you happened to be the first one in the tree, you were going to get blown out because someone else was going to hit you. Now as I was driving out of there, it's like if you've been listening to static too long, all you hear is static. I was listening to turkeys, so all you hear is the echoes of turkeys calling. Your truck would squeak and it would just sound like turkeys calling. It was absolutely amazing. And then there are some of those Rio Grande turkeys in Texas where they have flocks that are several hundred to even a thousand. I mean I've never actually seen one of those myself but I can only imagine what kind of deafening noise that would be.

Well roosting habitat, when we looked at that, it actually looked pretty doggone similar to, uh, to what we saw for nesting habitat. The mixed conifer wasn't as important. But they liked the steep slopes. They...they wanted to be down in those...those canyons. Those bigger, older mature trees. All that stuff tended to play, uh, real importance to them. And for all the other turkey habitat that we found, roosts are really critical. They usually don't get more than a mile from a roost site. They'll do it. But routinely they spend probably more than half their time less than a half a mile from a roost. It may not be the same roost they were in last night. They'll be moving to another roost for the next night. But probably more than half their time within half a mile. Uh, three-quarters of their time within a mile of a roost site.

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Thank you.