

APPENDIX 1: WILD TURKEY TIMELINE

The restoration of the wild turkey spurred on a game call boom, as a growing number of hunters found they needed turkey calls and other gear. Data on wild turkey populations is not available for many individual years over the past decades. Some of it is only found on a state-by-state basis, and all of it is, at best, an estimate. As Rob Keck, former CEO of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf), told me, “Those are the best estimated numbers. Turkey populations are very difficult to assess; states often had different methodologies to census turkeys.” The following are estimates from sources listed in this book and publicly available sources assembled by the author over the past decade. Also included are vital dates influencing wild turkey populations and turkey hunting. Some dates are approximate.

- 300 B.C. – Mayans first domesticate wild turkeys in Central Mexico. The native subspecies that was domesticated, *Meleagris gallopavo gallopavo*, is now extinct in the wild.
- 200 BC – Ancestral Puebloans (Anasazi) who lived on the Colorado Plateau domesticated turkeys in the Four Corners region. These birds had their roots in the Eastern and Rio Grande subspecies.
- Early 1500s – Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortés is gifted 1,500 turkeys by Aztec emperor Montezuma.
- 1519 – The Spanish introduce domesticated turkeys to Europe.
- 1608 – Europeans who settled in Jamestown brought domesticated turkeys “back” to America.
- 1620 – 10 million wild turkeys are estimated to be found in 39 continental U.S. states.
- 1621 – Pilgrim governor William Bradford wrote about how the colonists hunted wild turkeys during the autumn of 1621, noting they “found “a great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many.”
- 1708 – For the first time in the New World protection orders were issued for turkeys by the colony of New York. Despite that, they were extirpated there by 1844.
- 1748 – 18 months after Congress adopted the Great Seal, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to his daughter to express his disapproval of the bald eagle as the national symbol. He opined it should be the American wild turkey.
- 1774-1777 – Naturalist William Bartram travels the southeast U.S. and often encounters wild turkeys, writing, “The high forests ring with the noise... of these social sentinels, the watch-word being caught and repeated, from one to another, for hundreds of miles around; insomuch that the whole country, is for an hour or more, in an universal shout.”
- 1827 – Naturalist John James Audubon published in his 1827 *The Birds of America*; the first photo plate in the book was of a wild turkey gobbler. He noted they were “less plentiful in Georgia and the Carolinas, becomes still scarcer in Virginia and Pennsylvania, and is now very rarely seen to the eastward...through Long Island, the State of New York, and the country around the Lakes, I did not meet with a single (one)...Turkeys are still to be found along the whole line of the Alleghany Mountains, where they have become so wary as to be approached only with extreme difficulty.”
- 1830s- 1920 – Intensive logging removes tens of millions of forest acres across the U.S. His notes on the wild turkey in his 1832 *Ornithological Biography* are vaster than he records about any other bird, revealing the use of wingbone calls by hunters.
- 1863 – Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday, and turkey became Americans' center of table choice.
- 1874 – New Jersey became the first state to establish a “Closed season” for wild turkeys.
- 1879 – Charles L. Jordan writes in *Forest & Stream*, “I expect to catch thunder from somebody on this score, but I don’t care for all their thunder, so they don’t stop me from shooting old gobblers in March and April.” At the time of 28 states with seasons, 11 bridge into spring.
- 1898 – Charles L. Jordan published a series of articles in *Shooting & Fishing* that would become the book Edward A. McIlhenny published in 1914, *The Wild Turkey and Its Hunting*.
- 1900 – Congress passed the Lacey Act making illegal transport of game across state lines illegal but there is little funding for enforcement, game management, and conservation work.
- 1901 – The League of American Sportsmen lobbied for better protection for big game and wild turkey, leading to a closed season for turkeys in 2 states: Indiana and Nebraska.
- 1901-1909 – Theodore Roosevelt was the conservation President and helped establish the case for preserving our natural resources.
- 1910 – Wild turkeys were protected in 26 states, given drastic declines or extirpation.

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- 1914 – Edward A. McIlhenny published the first book on turkey hunting with material originating from Charles Jordan: *The Wild Turkey and Its Hunting*. Jordan's friend John K. Renaud provided the manuscript to McIlhenny after Jordan, a game estate manager, was killed by a poacher in 1909.
- 1920-1930s – 30,000-200,000 wild turkeys survive in 21 states out of the 39 in their original range.
- 1920s-1950s – Much of the work to restore the wild turkey is rooted in a misguided effort to introduce farm raised birds into the wild.
- 1926 – A historical low occurred where only 13 states had a stated wild turkey season.
- 1929-1941 – The Great Depression sees many farms abandoned or gone fallow, which increases habitat needed for wildlife like wild turkeys to survive.
- 1933 – Aldo Leopold became the first professor of wildlife management in the U.S.
- 1934 – Congress passed the Fish & Wildlife Coordination Act so state agencies could work together.
- 1937 – The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937, also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, taxed hunting guns and ammunition to pay for wildlife restoration efforts.
- 1939-1945 – World War II spurred technological advancements that would later aid in wild turkey restoration efforts, such as the cannon net and radio telemetry.
- 1943 – Henry Mosby and Charles Handley led the way in new wild turkey research and management practices detailed in their book *The Wild Turkey in Virginia*.
- 1948 – H.H. Dill and W.H. Thornsberry invented a cannon net that could be fired over a flock of birds.
- 1951 – Herman "Duff" Holbrook captures the first wild turkeys with a cannon net in the Francis Marion National Forest in Huger, South Carolina.
- 1958 – 20 states with wild turkeys have stated turkey seasons.
- 1959 – 320,000 wild turkeys estimated to be in the U.S. 31 states are now active in wild turkey restoration or well into the planning process. The first Wild Turkey Symposium is held between notable state biologists and game managers, resulting in the recognition that farm-raised turkeys do not survive or reproduce as compared to trapped and transferred turkeys.
- 1973 – 1.3 million turkeys are believed to be in the U.S., and 22 states have spring gobbler seasons. Tom Rodgers founded the National Wild Turkey Federation as a conservation organization.
- 1974 – 39 states now have turkey seasons; 16 of those states are outside its historical range.
- 1978 – 1.8 million wild turkeys are estimated in the U.S., and around 30 states now have seasons.
- 1980 – A groundbreaking for the NWTf's Wild Turkey Research Center in Edgefield, SC, was held. Wild turkey researcher James Earl Kennamer, Ph.D., was hired to lead wild turkey management.
- The 1980s – 47 states now have wild turkey populations, thanks to trap-and-transfer programs.
- 1990 – 3.5 million wild turkeys are estimated in the U.S.
- 1991 – For the first time, 49 states hold wild turkey seasons (Alaska is the exception).
- 1994 – 4.2 million wild turkeys are now pursued by 2.1 million hunters; An estimated 654,000 birds are taken annually.
- 1999 – 5.4 million wild turkeys are estimated in the U.S.
- 2004 – 6 million or more turkeys estimated to be in the U.S.
- 2014 – 6.2 million turkeys wild turkeys are estimated in the U.S.
- 2017 – 7 million wild turkeys are estimated in the U.S. after 200,000 wild turkeys have been transferred since the 1950s; this may prove the high-water mark in post-restoration populations, as a decline biologist predicted, including the late Wayne Bailey, follows.
- 2019 – 6.9 million wild turkeys and 2.5 million hunters are found in the U.S.
- 2021 – Another conservation organization for wild turkeys, Turkeys For Tomorrow, is founded.
- 2023 – 6 million (or slightly more) wild turkeys now estimated.