

IMAGES

... then and now

From: The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Ohio's Wild Turkeys



Indians hunted and dined on wild turkeys for centuries before Europeans arrived and the Pilgrims celebrated their Thanksgiving by feasting on this native American bird. Current day holiday meals often feature domesticated turkey – an overproduced mass of white meat that barely resembles its cousin, *Meleagris gallopavo*.

This lean strong bird is powerful and intelligent, with an impressive appearance. The males (toms or gobblers) weigh about 16 pounds; females (hens) average around 9 pounds. Adults measure 4 feet long from beak to tail and stand 4 feet tall. They appear generally black or brown, which camouflages them, though feathers may be any combination of brown, purple, green bronze, red and blue. Gobblers have caruncles, knobs of skin on their foreheads, and red wattles, lobes of flesh on their chests. These appendages change to a gaudy color combination during the mating season, and the sharp spurs on their legs serve as weapons. The position of the turkey's eyes on its head enables it to view almost 360 degrees. They see in color and have very keen hearing. Though they are heavy, they run fast – 25 miles per hour. In flight their 5-6 foot wing span propels them at 50 miles an hour.

Eastern woodland Indians consumed large quantities of wild turkey, evidenced by numerous turkey bones in their refuse heaps. They used turkey feathers in their ornamental clothing and as quills on their arrows, the leg spurs as arrowheads, and leg bones for awls and other tools.

There are several viable explanations of how the turkey got its name. The Indian name for the bird was *firkee*, which might have been mispronounced. The bird's call: *turk, turk, turk* is another possibility. Or, some believe that Christopher Columbus, thinking the land he discovered was attached to India, which has lots of peacocks, called them *tuka*, which is the Indian word for peacock.

Turkeys adapt well to many habitats, from forests to fields. Social animals, they do not migrate during the winter, gathering in flocks ranging up to 50 birds. This helps them avoid predators. They communicate using cackles, clucks, chirps, putts, hisses, and yelps. Toms gobble to attract hens during breeding season. Promiscuous birds, toms mate with several hens who produce 7 - 17 eggs, which incubate for 28 days. Their diet includes acorns, insects, berries, greens, and seeds. They consume "anything slow enough to catch and small enough to eat." Within each flock there are a dominant male and female, and others maintain a strict pecking order. Wary and cautious, they possess stamina and resourcefulness and are considered to be the 2nd smartest bird in the forest, right below crows.

Turkeys have loomed large in American history. In 1776 Congress chose the bald eagle as the national bird over the dove or wild turkey. Benjamin Franklin later wrote that he considered the eagle a "bird of bad moral character," noting he wished the turkey had been chosen as it was "a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America". When Rutherford Hayes was in office, his Presidential china was decorated with the wild turkey.

During the 19th century the wild turkey population declined drastically due to overhunting and habitat destruction. Turkey shoots, in which 100 or more fowl were shot in a single hunt, and market hunting by professionals to supply meat to the cities of industrial America thinned the ranks of the bird. By 1900 the turkey had disappeared completely from most of the states where it originally thrived, including Ohio. New laws were passed restricting hunting, and in the 1950s a trap and release project began to restore the national fowl population, with wild turkeys successfully introduced in 42 states. It is estimated that 180,000 wild turkeys were present in all 88 Ohio counties in 2005. It is permissible to hunt them in 37 counties – but not in Hamilton County.

These magnificent birds have been spotted in small flocks in village Green Areas. Seeing these impressive birds in Indian Hill's woodlands is a thrill for nature lovers and residents alike.