

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Wild Turkeys of Ohio



No other game bird has had more impact on people in North America than the wild turkey. It was valued by Native Americans, European immigrants, and their descendants. The wild turkey has become central to the U.S. national identity.

The largest game bird on the continent, the wild turkey, known as *Meleagris gallopavo*, is related to guinea fowls, chickens, pheasants, and quail. Its original range was from Canada to central Mexico, but now it can be found worldwide. This lean strong bird is powerful and intelligent with an impressive appearance. Males (toms or gobblers) weigh up to 20 pounds; females (hens) average around 9 pounds. Adults measure 4 feet long from beak to tail when standing and stand 4 feet tall. They generally appear black or brown, which provides camouflage, though feathers may be an iridescent combination of brown, purple, green, bronze, red, and blue. Gobblers have caruncles/snoods (knobs of skin on their foreheads), red wattles (lobes of flesh on their chests), and beards that grow longer as they age. Their appendages change to a gaudy color during the mating season, and the sharp spurs on their legs serve as weapons. All turkeys have phenomenal eyesight, and the position of their eyes on their heads enable them to view almost 360 degrees. They see in color and have very keen hearing. Though they are heavy, they run 25 miles per hour. In flight their 5–6-foot wingspan propels them at 50 miles an hour.

There are several viable explanations of how the turkey got its name. Native Americans' name for the bird was *firkee*, which might have been mispronounced. The bird's call: *turk, turk, turk* is another possibility. Some believe that Christopher Columbus, thinking the land he discovered was attached to India, which has lots of peacocks, called them *tuka*, the Indian word for peacock. Others say Europeans who encountered turkeys thought they resembled guineafowl, a species which reached Europe via trade with Turkey.

Turkeys adapt well to many habitats, from forests to fields. Social animals, they do not migrate in winter, and gather in flocks of 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 mating 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." Wary and cautious, they possess stamina and resourcefulness and are the second smartest bird, right next to crows.



Turkeys have loomed large in American history. Native Americans consumed large quantities of wild turkey. They used their feathers in ornamental clothing and as quills on their arrows, the leg spurs as arrowheads, and leg bones for awls and other tools. Pilgrims feasted on wild turkeys at the first Thanksgiving. In 1776 Congress chose the bald eagle as the national bird over the dove or wild turkey. Benjamin Franklin later wrote that he wished the turkey had been chosen as it was "a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America." President Rutherford Hayes' official White House china was decorated with the wild turkey.

During the 19th century the wild turkey population declined drastically due to habitat destruction and overhunting. By the early 1900s 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 this fowl population, with wild turkeys successfully introduced in 42 states. Conservation efforts have resulted in the successful comeback of the wild turkey. All 88 counties of Ohio have these birds. Currently, there is a wild turkey hunting season in fall and spring regulated by the ODNR Division of Wildlife.