

Talkin' About New Hampshire's Big Turkey Comeback

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A tom turkey. photo © Tim Lumley

No animal says November better than turkeys. Not only are they a central part of our Thanksgiving celebration but when you drive along any of our region's roads, you're bound to come across flocks of these native birds. With their large stocky build, bare head and neck, iridescent bronze body feathers and black and white wing bars, they hard to miss on our bare autumn landscape. But did you know turkeys are one of New Hampshire's greatest wildlife recovery stories?

Prior to European colonization, there were an estimated 10 million wild turkeys gobbling and strutting about from southern Maine to Florida to the Rocky Mountains. With the arrival of the settlers, the turkey quickly became a household staple. Valued for not only its meat and eggs, its feathers were often used as mattress stuffing, fans and the whole tail – as a broom.

The Disappearance of Turkeys in New

Hampshire

As Europeans spread out across New England, they transformed the landscape from forests into farmland and it didn't take too long before New Hampshire's woods were mostly fields. By the mid-1800s, 70% of the land south of the White Mountains, went from mature woods with chestnuts, oaks, and maples to cleared agricultural lands.

Turkeys, along with countless other animals, struggled to scratch out a living, unable to find the food and cover they depended on for survival. By as early as the end of the Revolutionary War, the turkey population was in trouble. Habitat loss combined with unregulated hunting, sealed the turkey's fate in much of New England by the mid-1800s. The last wild turkey sighting in New Hampshire was reported in Weare in 1854.

For 121 years, not a peent or gobble could be heard in our New Hampshire fields or forests. But in 1975, a reintroduction project spearheaded by New Hampshire Fish and Game released 25 turkeys from New York State in Walpole, N.H. Once they were well-established in the Connecticut River Valley, wildlife biologists trapped and relocated small groups of turkeys to other parts of the state. Now, according to New Hampshire Fish and Game, more than 25,000 turkeys call New Hampshire home, and they're found in every county.

The Natural History of Turkeys

During this time of year, don't expect to hear much gobbling, though. That's for springtime, when toms court females with impressive tail and plumage displays while making their iconic gobbles. The dominant tom will gather a harem of hens and mate with multiple females during the spring breeding season. Once mating season concludes in April or May, the males then spend the rest of the year with other toms. The hens lay between eight and 15 eggs in ground nest lined with leaves. Chicks hatch about 28 days later, usually in early June and then hens will form small flocks, often with two or more other adult females and their young of the year.

Turkeys are omnivores, with seeds and nuts making up the majority of their diet. Acorns, beechnuts, ash seeds, and cherries are considered to be the primary staple of their diet supplemented by insects, berries, sedges, seeds, and grasses.

Around Thanksgiving season and beyond, look for wild turkeys wherever acorns, beech nuts, and ash seeds might be found, scratching and pecking into the fallen leaves. When the snow piles up, turkeys can't afford to spend their energy scratching deep snow in search of food. Instead they feed on the small cones of hemlock trees, evergreen ferns, the stalks of sensitive ferns, club mosses and even burdock.

During winter, turkeys form flocks or rafters of same sex individuals and can number over 200 turkeys in a single rafter. Such a large group helps them when it comes to detecting predators, such as

coyote, fox, fisher and bobcat. During daylight turkeys search for food, while at night, they fly up to roost in large softwoods.

How to Support Our Local Turkey Population

It might be tempting to feed wild turkeys in your backyard but there are many reasons to reconsider this past-time. Feeding these large gregarious birds can lead to disease and parasites within the flock, predation from savvy predators, and increase the likelihood of negative turkey/human conflicts.

The best way to support these birds is to manage the landscape for good turkey habitat by maintaining such key features as beech and oak stands, and encouraging understory vegetation such as apples, hawthorns, witch hazel, and viburnums, along with thickets of juniper, sumac, and grapes. Wet seeps in winter are an important habitat component, providing these birds with water, occasional insects, and access to specific vegetation such as sensitive fern stalks.

Next time you encounter a flock of turkeys, take a few minutes to consider how close we came to never seeing these birds again. Consider helping the state keep track of turkeys by participating in [New Hampshire Fish and Game's Winter Turkey Flock Survey](#), which typically runs from Jan. 1 through March 31.

And to get a quick, close-up visit with wild turkeys watch the Harris Center's [Wild at Home Wild Turkey video](#). 🐾



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