



# Wild Turkeys in the Driftless Area

By Julie M. Johnson

Of all the large birds that disappeared then returned to the Driftless Area — eagles, peregrines, pelicans, turkeys — the turkey stands alone. The others are soaring birds of the river, but turkeys, because they thrive in our steep oak-hickory forests, narrow valleys and ridge tops, are near perfect representatives of the Driftless Area. And of all the large birds that have returned, turkeys are the only kind that needed to be chauffeured here and the only one that is hunted.

turkey had survived in remote areas of the Missouri Ozarks and in large swampy areas farther south. Because the Ozarks' landscape of hills, open fields, streams and cropland resembles

The wild turkey reintroduction succeeded beyond any agency's expectations.



While turkeys spend much of their time on the ground foraging, they take to the trees when threatened or roosting at night.



Turkeys wander close to farm buildings and human dwellings.

Photos this page courtesy of National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf).

## Restoring Turkeys

I never heard turkeys gobbling in the fields and forests of central Minnesota during my childhood. In the early 1980s, I moved to the Driftless Area and heard my first wild turkeys. Now every spring, I see toms fanning their tails and puffing up their feathers on field edges near the woods, while hens forage nearby. They are doing fine now, but there may be fewer in the future.

I didn't hear wild turkeys in my childhood because with the onset of Euro-American immigrants felling trees, plowing prairies and killing fauna, wild turkeys disappeared from the Upper Midwest by the late 1800s.

In the 1970s, departments of natural resources and organizations such as the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) began reintroducing turkeys to the Midwest. The eastern wild

the Driftless Area, biologists thought the turkeys from there might do well here.

A federal law prohibits selling wild animals, so state agencies couldn't buy wild turkeys from Missouri. Instead, they arranged a swap. Missouri was trying to re-establish ruffed grouse, so Minnesota grouse were traded for turkeys. An Iowa forester remembers trading river otters for turkeys. NWTf volunteers recall driving to Missouri to pick up turkeys to deliver to Driftless biologists.

The wild turkey reintroduction succeeded beyond any agency's expectations. The turkeys now populate a wider range than they did originally. Even though the human population is much larger than it was in 1890, there

is enough mix of open fields, water and woodlands to support a growing turkey population, to the point that sometimes they become a nuisance — even in the Twin Cities metro area and suburbs. They tear up gardens, peck at shiny windows and scrape paint off cars. It is illegal for a citizen to move a wild turkey, so the best option for dealing with a nuisance turkey is to call animal control or a game warden. Luke Garver, wild turkey manager of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) said, “One call was for kids that were pursued by toms between vehicles and the high school doors.”

## Turkey Woods

While state DNRs, nonprofit conservation organizations and private landowners have worked hard to re-establish a healthy wild turkey population in the Driftless, they are concerned about our changing forests. The red-and white-oak-dominated Driftless forest is aging and being replaced by maple-basswood climax forests. This is a threat to wild turkeys.

Oak-hickory forests provide nuts and acorns, called “mast,” an important fall and winter protein for turkeys.

“The forest is the main thing of concern, more than heavy rain events that tend to be in regional pockets” said Jim Jansen, northeast district wildlife supervisor for the Iowa DNR. “Turkeys are an indicator species for a whole slew of wildlife, and Iowa is losing seven percent of mast-producing oak-hickory forest per year to the shade colony of basswood trees.”

Although turkeys are omnivorous generalists, he explained, in ecosystems without nuts and acorns, turkeys survive in much lower densities.

Young oak trees can’t grow in shade, but young maple trees can grow in full shade, and this is why Driftless forests are changing. Dense invasions of buckthorn and bush honeysuckle shrubs also shade out young oak and hickory trees.

In the 27,000-acre Whitewater Wildlife Management Area, in southeast Minnesota — the largest tract of public land in the Driftless Area — the DNR is working with the NWTF to retire some farm fields. According to assistant manager Christine Johnson, “We’ll put in mast-producing trees, create habitat for turkey nests and bugging habitat for poults.” Bugging habitat of short plants supports a rich variety of insects that provide the protein poults need in their first summer.

In oak-hickory forests, turkey habitat can be improved by cutting some mature oaks to let in light for oak seedlings and by eradicating invasive brush to create more open woodlands. This is an ongoing, labor-intensive process. To conserve mast-producing oak forests for wild turkeys and other wildlife, state agencies partner with the NWTF and other nonprofit organizations,

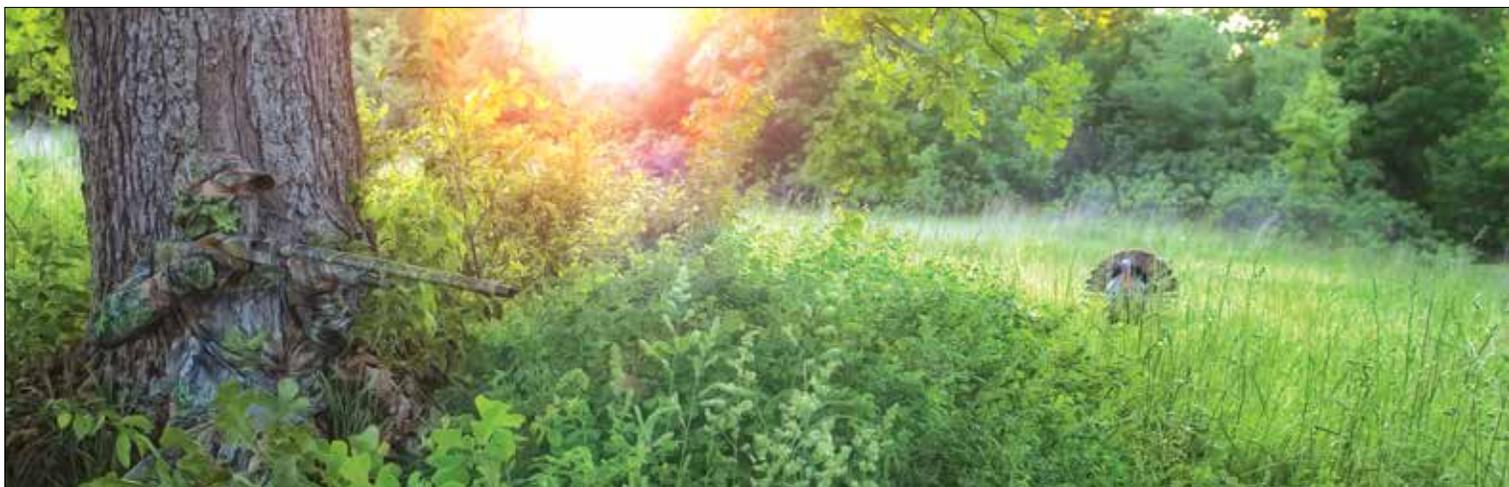


Young turkeys, called poults, are vulnerable to predators until they can fly. (NWTF)

such as the Nature Conservancy, Pheasants Forever, Audubon Society and American Bird Conservancy. The NWTF works with landowners in the Driftless Area and partners with the Aldo Leopold Foundation and the Driftless Forest Network in Wisconsin.

To try a more cost-effective management tool, the Illinois DNR is starting to spray dense areas of bush honeysuckle on public lands with the herbicide glyphosate in late fall, when most plants are dormant and leaves on bush honeysuckle are still green. They follow up with a prescribed burn in the spring.

“In many cases, the efficacy of treatments has been night-and-day between stands which were only sprayed in the fall versus those sprayed and then burned in the following spring,” Garver said.



In spring, a tom struts about in a clearing displaying to attract hens, while a hunter in camouflage waits, nearly invisible. (Mossy Oak/NWTF)



(Courtney Celley/USFWS)

## Finding Turkeys

When the wild turkeys returned to the Driftless Area, friends began telling me tales of their attempts to bag their birds. They had to “call” a turkey in, wear camouflage and show zero movements, because turkeys have astounding vision, great hearing and fast reflexes. The mystique of turkey’s sensory powers grew larger than life in my mind. I wanted to hunt turkeys.

Turkeys are a flock species. According to the NWTF, they communicate with 11 common calls during mating, brooding and foraging seasons. The most notable is the loud, startling gobble during spring mating. Toms gobble to attract females and warn competitors. The plain yelp asks, “Where are you?” Cackles are 10 to 15 irregularly spaced notes as turkeys fly. Hens cry high-pitched “kee-kee” notes to regroup scattered young turkeys.

It seemed that to bag a turkey, I needed to talk turkey. I was shy then, and the idea of making loud embarrassing gobbles in the woods to call a tom nearly overwhelmed me. I tried though. I bought a diaphragm mouth call. I bought a box call. I bought a tape of turkey calls to practice, but I never excelled at calling.

I decided that I needed to simply find turkeys before I committed to buying the gear and hunting them. I had read that turkeys drink water in the morning, so one autumn day I woke before dawn, donned some lightweight army surplus coveralls and worked my way on foot down to the valley below my home. As I neared the pond, I stepped lightly and crouched,

though it was still dark. I feared that I’d never see turkeys if I made any sound. I crept into a small ravine and stationed myself belly to the ground just off a mowed trail in the autumn’s crunchy leaves and forb stems.

Unarmed, I could relax, smell the earth and listen. After the sun rose, I had to wait awhile, but then I began to hear the soft cluck, cluck, putt of contented hens. Freeze! Do — not — even — blink! Over a dozen turkeys walked right past me as they foraged their way up the trail into the woods. Twelve inches away. Why shoot turkeys when I could reach out and grab one

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by the foot? Unbelievable! Now I knew I could hunt them.

In the four Driftless Area states — Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin — there are turkey hunting seasons in spring and fall. The spring season brings out the most hunters, in part because there are no other hunting seasons and many believe it’s easier to hunt them when the toms are preoccupied with mating. The fall season, on the other hand, overlaps with deer, waterfowl and other small game seasons.

The spring seasons vary among the states, but often begin with a youth season, then open for approximately five to seven, one-week intervals for gun and archery hunters. Turkeys are polygamous, and courting toms put on an impressive show. Spring hunting season begins after most hens are bred

and beginning to incubate eggs. Only male turkeys can be harvested. To call toms, hunters can play the rival by gobbling through the reed of diaphragm calls or shaker calls. The lonely-hen call, or yelps, produced on a slate and strike device, might bring in your tom. Placing decoy hens can serve as further enticement.

After spring breeding and nesting season, toms flock back together until the next spring. Hens sit on 12 to 14 eggs about 28 days on ground nests. When the featherless poults hatch, in late May or early June, they are covered in down, and are susceptible to predators and rain. The hens shelter the poults at night and from rain under their large wings, but extended periods of rain are life threatening. In four to six weeks, poults grow feathers and can fly up to roost in a tree at night. They have poor night vision, and roosting helps them avoid predators, such as skunks, crows, raccoons, bobcats, coyotes and foxes. From summer through winter, it’s normal to see three to four hens with all their poults foraging and roosting together.

Fall turkey season success has a lot to do with finding where turkeys roost. Both toms and hens can be harvested. The toms are hardest to find in autumn. Hens and poults stay together in large flocks until spring. One way to find the flocks is to go out at last light and listen for the flocks flying up to roost. When their large wings hit the branches, it’s easy to hear them. Sneak back to the same spot in the morning. Either try to set up where you think they will fly down, or when the turkeys fly down, disperse them and kee-kee call them back like a concerned hen.

## The Hunt

To prepare for my first turkey hunt, I applied for and won a turkey hunting license for the spring season through Minnesota’s lottery system. I bought camouflage gloves, a face net and a hat. I wrapped camouflage tape around the barrel of my single-shot, 20-gauge shotgun. No glint of light was going to alert my turkey. When the gobbling began and my season approached, I scouted for turkeys and chose my first hunting spot. I found that toms often called from open fields near the woods

to lure the hens out. Just inside the woods I found a large log that I could lean against. Unlike deer hunting from a tree stand, turkey hunting is generally done on the ground. Near my log,

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a deer trail left the woods into an open hillside of alfalfa. It seemed a perfect staging area.

I settled against my log well before dawn. When the sun rose, I could hear turkeys fly down from their roosts. I heard the tom first. He gobbled when he landed. His strutting and gobbling brought the hens out like obedient soldiers. I could hear their quiet putt, putting as they came down the trail in single file right beside me. I had my shotgun in position against my shoulder since the first gobble. When the tom worked his way to the open field in

front of me, distracted and strutting, I shot him. When the blast receded, ears ringing, heart pounding, I stood to claim my first turkey.

## Turkey Dinner

Though it was May, I baked my first turkey as I would a Thanksgiving bird. An oven bag is good for tenderizing. I had to use two bags, overlapping in the middle, because wild turkey legs are long. We deep fried my second turkey, which sears the outside, sealing the juices inside.

Last spring, my son-in-law marinated turkey breasts overnight in the refrigerator, then slow-baked them and served them with wild nettle pesto risotto. Because wild turkeys are more active than domestic turkeys, their leg meat can be tougher. It's best to tenderize them in a crockpot, and shred them for sandwiches or soup.

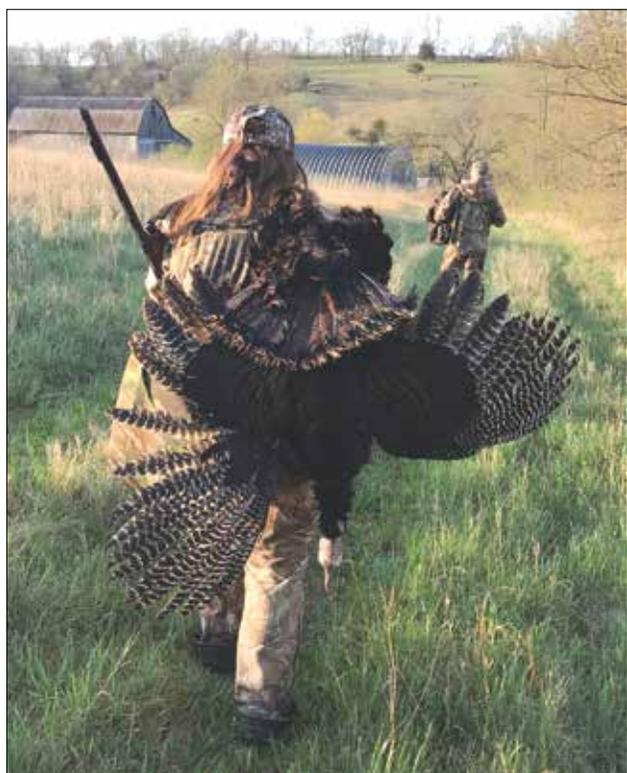
Rick Horton, NWTF biologist, cuts breast meat into one-inch cubes, then breads and fries them to serve with multiple dipping sauces. Ken and Marcia Polhamus, NWTF volunteers from Galena, Ill., put butter and cream in a crockpot with rubbed Cajun blackened seasoned turkey breasts, and they say, in stereo, "Nothing tastes better." You can serve fall turkey with sides of wild

rice with craisins and hickory nuts with butternut squash.

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Go find them. Your journey will be an adventure. 🍷

*Julie M. Johnson (with turkey below) lives near Winona, Minn. Her last story for Big River was "Chewing Up a Neighborhood," July-August 2007.*



A successful hunter returns. (Courtesy of Nicky McDonald)

## Turkey Specs

The wild turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*, is a large-bodied, long-legged bird that runs fast and flies up to tree branches to flee from predators or to roost at night. Most turkey flights begin with running to get the lift needed to launch its large belly into flight. Turkeys can run up to 12 miles an hour and fly at speeds up to 60 miles an hour for distances less than a mile.

The males, called "jakes" as yearlings, become "toms" in their second year. The females are called "hens," and their little ones are "poults." Adult females can stand 36 inches and weigh 12 pounds. Males can stand 48 inches and weigh as much as 30 pounds with wing spans of 48 inches.

The Midwest is home to the eastern wild turkey, but there are four other subspecies that range in different ecosystems throughout North America. The eastern hen is brown to grey and the tom has deep brown feathers striped with white. Toms' heads are white with featherless, bumpy skin with blue around the eyes and a drooping red wattle. A long, narrow, charcoal-grey beard sprouts from toms' chests. Just above each foot on the back of each leg there's a sharp spur about a half-inch on jakes and over an inch on toms. Spurs grow throughout a tom's life and are one way to age them. 🍷