

Turkeys

Prepared by the **National Wildlife Control Training Program**. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>
 Research-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.
 One source for training, animal handling and control methods, and wildlife species information.



Figure 1. Male turkey (*Melagris gallopavo*) making a mating display to the female (Left). Photo by Robert Burton, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Species Overview

Conflicts

Wild turkeys are blamed for damaging gardens, disturbing turf, and fouling property with excrement.

Legal Status

In South Carolina, turkeys are protected game birds, with designated hunting seasons. Regulations are set by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and vary by game zone. Specific rules and regulations can be found online. <http://dnr.sc.gov>

For nuisance turkeys, depredation permits may be requested from any South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) Wildlife Management or Law Enforcement office at no cost to the applicant. These permits are

valid for 30 days, and are renewable if additional time is needed to alleviate the problem.

For further information: <http://dnr.sc.gov>.

Identification

The wild turkey (*Melagris gallopavo*, Figure. 1) is classified in the Order known as Galliforms because they are heavy-bodied, fowl-like birds with short and thick bill, short and rounded wings, and short legs.

Physical Description

Wild turkeys are large birds about 36 to 48 inches in length. Males (toms) weigh 17 to 21 pounds and females weigh 8 to 11 pounds. Heads of turkeys have few feathers with males having the fewest. Males are more brightly colored while females have more brownish and tan coloration. Toms also have black- and white-barred flight feathers and spurs on their legs.

Species Range

Wild turkeys are found throughout most of the US with the exception of the desert southwest and tundra areas.

Health and Safety Concerns

Wild turkeys are not considered to be threats to human health and safety. Although rare, some turkeys have “attacked” people when they came too close. Turkey presence near airports and highways poses the risk of bird strikes.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Reproduction

In early spring, males gobble, strut, and flare their feathers to attract mates. One male will inseminate multiple females. Other than mating, males provide no care for females or young. Females nest in April to May, laying an egg per day to create a clutch ranging in size from 4 to 17 eggs. Females may nest up to two additional times due to their ability to store sperm. Renesting often occurs if clutches or broods are lost, but brood loss is not a requirement.

The female will incubate the eggs for up to 4 weeks. After hatching, poults are flightless and will remain in ground nests for up to 2 weeks.

Nesting/Denning Cover

A hen will scratch a 1-inch depression into the soil to place the eggs. They prefer nesting locations with abundant ground cover between 1½ to 6 feet tall and isolated from disturbances, such as roads.

Behavior

Wild turkeys are very social animals, often congregating in flocks of 10 to 50 birds. They have excellent vision but their night vision is poor, which helps explain their diurnal behavior. Strong legs enable them to run up to speeds of 12 miles per hour. Turkeys can fly but they typically only fly to avoid danger or move to new habitat. Turkeys have been recorded to fly at speeds reaching 55 miles per hour. They can fly a mile with little difficulty.

Habitat

Turkeys prefer areas where fields are broken by large stands of woods containing mature pine-hardwoods and other mast producing trees. Trees located near streams are preferred for nesting.

Food Habits

Wild turkeys eat a variety of plant- and animal-based foods, including, acorns, seeds of conifer trees, grass seeds, corn, silage, apples, peanuts, barley, rye, soybeans, grapes, wheat, tomatoes, apples, strawberries, ginseng, and insects.

Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

Turkeys have a variety of calls including the predator alarm, the alarm putt, and the distress scream. Males will gobble to attract females during mating season. Turkey tracks, with three toes facing forward and one facing to the rear, look similar to many walking birds. You identify tracks from a turkey by their size (Figure 2).

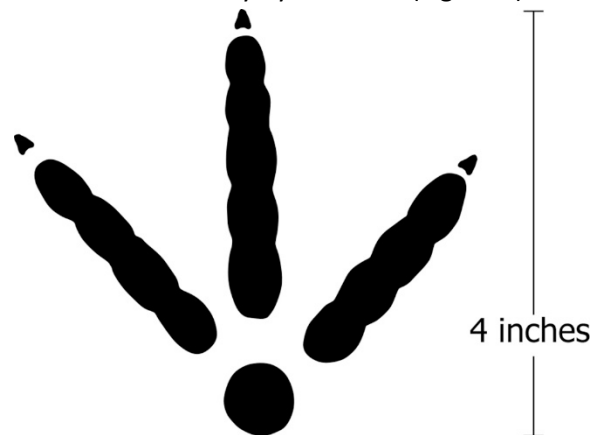


Figure 2. Tracks of wild turkey. Image by Dee Ebbeka.

Damage Identification

Damage to Landscapes

Turkeys roosting in trees can foul the area below with excrement. Their vocalizations also can be disturbing to nearby residents. Turkeys

may be responsible for minor damage to turf as they scratch and forage for food.

Damage to Crops and Livestock

Research has shown that turkey damage to row crops is minimal, often consisting of little more than damage to a few plants by plucking and dust bathing. Frequently, turkeys are blamed for damage caused by other species. In vineyards, damage by turkeys tends to occur along the perimeter. Wild turkeys tend to pluck several grapes from the same part of a grape cluster, whereas other birds tend to just puncture grapes or will take only individual grapes before moving on to another cluster.

Turkeys do not pose threats to livestock.

Damage to Structures

Turkeys are not known to damage structures. Their roosting, however, may result in soiling of structures by their excrement (Figure 3). On occasion, turkeys have pecked vehicles, causing damage to paint and even breaking side view mirrors.



Figure 3. A wild turkey on a roof in the middle of a medium-sized city. Photo by Stephen M. Vantassel.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Habitat Modification

Habitat modification generally is not a feasible means of reducing conflicts with turkeys. Removal of isolated roost trees, however, may cause turkeys to roost elsewhere.

Exclusion

Nets (2-inch weave) provide the best way to prevent access to sensitive areas by wild turkeys. To be effective, nets must stop access from all accessible sides, thereby making exclusion quite expensive and cumbersome to use.

Use bird spikes or other ledge exclusion products to prevent turkeys from roosting in unwanted locations.

Frightening Devices

Short-term results may be obtained by the use of frightening devices. Hang strips of Mylar® tape in locations where turkeys are not wanted. Motion-sensing sprinklers, propane cannons, radios, and scarecrows also have shown some effectiveness. Move items every few days to reduce the likelihood of the turkeys habituating to them.

Red lasers, when shined in the eyes of turkeys, have been reported to cause turkeys to fly. Follow all safety guidelines when using lasers.

Pyrotechnics are effective in frightening turkeys from roosts and foraging areas. Blasts from a shotgun directed in a manner that will not injure birds will cause turkeys to flee as well.

Some landowners have reported benefits from hazing turkeys with dogs and from patrols of

individuals on all-terrain vehicles. Be sure turkeys are not harmed when using any frightening technique.

Repellents

Products made with methyl anthranilate are available to disperse roosting birds and to protect blueberries, cherries, and grapes from bird damage.

Toxicants

None are available.

Shooting

Shooting is an effective way to manage turkeys. Shotguns (12-gauge) with No. 6 or heavier shot is effective for taking turkeys within 30 yards. Shooters are advised to test various loads and chokes to determine the best combination for their needs. Follow all safety and legal requirements before shooting.

Hunting season varies by game zone; be sure to follow all rules and regulations set forth by SCDNR. Contact your nearest SCDNR field office for technical assistance and depredation permits.

Trapping

Effective trapping of turkeys requires proper location of traps and enough pre-baiting (whole corn) to ensure turkeys habituate to the site.

Funnel traps are very effective in capturing turkeys. Traps are 4 x 8 x 10 feet in size and are made with 4- x 4-inch mesh. Six-gauge welded galvanized livestock panels work well. Construct a funnel at one end that is 20 inches high, 16 inches wide, and 32 inches long. The funnel should narrow down towards the cage to a size

of 11 x 11 inches for southern turkeys. Increase size for larger northern turkeys. Check traps more often during hot weather to prevent turkeys from dying of heat stress.

Contact your nearest SCDNR field office for technical assistance with nuisance turkeys before implementing any trapping regime.

Disposition

Translocation

Translocation of nuisance turkeys is not permitted.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia by carbon dioxide is suitable for wild turkeys.

Resources

Government or private agencies, universities, extension service.

Web Resources

[Http://dnr.sc.gov](http://dnr.sc.gov)

<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>

<http://icwdm.org/>

<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

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Relocation

Due to their mobility, relocation of wild turkeys is only practical when turkeys need to be rescued from life-threatening hazards.