



Branching Out

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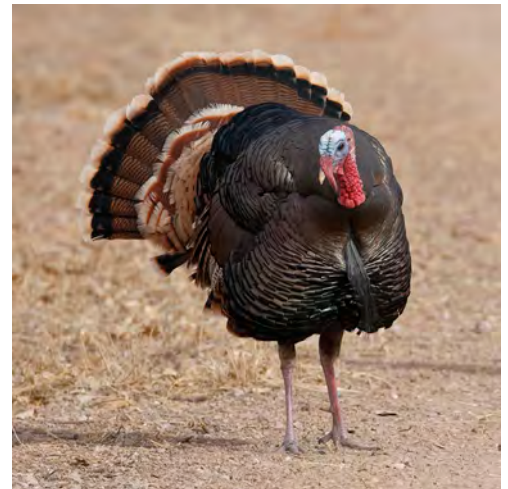
Fall 2019

A Triumphant Turkey Tale

The first official Canadian Thanksgiving took place on November 6, 1879. In honour of the 140th anniversary of the holiday, this edition of the newsletter is dedicated to turkeys - in particular, wild turkeys.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, wild turkeys were a common sight throughout the forests of southern Ontario and Quebec. Unable to cope with the dual threats of deforestation and unregulated hunting, their numbers declined dramatically during the 19th century. By 1909, they had been extirpated from their entire Canadian range.

In the following decades, biologists tried turning to a captive breeding program as a way to reintroduce wild turkeys to Ontario, only to see the released birds get scooped up by hawks, coyotes and raccoons. Birds that were raised in captivity seemingly lacked the wherewithal to survive in the wild. But for the dedication of Dr. C. Davison Ankney, then a zoologist with the University of Western Ontario, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the support of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, the story could have ended there. Instead it turned into one of the most successful wildlife restocking programs in Canadian history.



Male Wild Turkey or “tom”



Female Wild Turkey or “hen”

One of the keys to a successful reintroduction was the development of a Howitzer-propelled net in the 1960's, allowing biologists to capture live wild turkeys for the first time. By the early 1980s, restocking efforts using captured wild birds were succeeding south of the border, and Dr. Ankney began urging the province to try again. Negotiations were soon underway with wildlife managers from several US states. In a series of blockbuster trades, Ontario agreed to send moose to Michigan, river otters to Missouri and Hungarian partridges to New York - all in exchange for 274 wild turkeys. By obtaining birds from a number of different locations, wildlife managers ensured that Ontario's new wild turkey population had a diverse gene pool to help ensure a successful reintroduction... in the same way that a shrewd investor acquires a diversified stock portfolio.

The first wild turkey release occurred in the spring of 1984 in the Long Point area. Other releases followed... before long, birds from the growing Ontario population were being captured for release elsewhere in the province. Thirty five years later, the program has succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Wild turkeys have since spread throughout southern Ontario and Quebec, and into areas of the Canadian Shield, an area well outside of their historical range. The current population in Ontario is now estimated at 100,000. From an initial release of 274 birds, that represents a return on investment of over 30,000 percent!

Habitat

Wild turkeys feed on hickory nuts, beech nuts, acorns, fruit, snails, worms and amphibians. They nest on the ground in dead leaves at the bases of trees, under brush piles or thick shrubbery. The oak savanna of Huron Wood and Pinery Park is ideal habitat for these birds, and they are now a common sight in the area. Wild turkeys have also adapted well to southern Ontario's agricultural landscape with its mix of cropland and forests.



A wild turkey nest

Too Successful?

Some biologists have expressed concern in recent years that Ontario's growing wild turkey population could pose a threat to natural ecosystems. South of the border, where other wild turkey reintroductions have been successful, damage to the forest understory has been reported by biologists. As wild turkeys forage, they sometimes scrape away the thick, spongy layers of decomposing leaves or "litter" — material that holds moisture, recycles nutrients from fallen leaves and branches, and give seeds a soft place to take root. There is also some concern that wild turkeys may compete for food with other native species like Ruffed Grouse. Ontario has both a spring and fall turkey hunt, which targets primarily males. Since several females (hens) will mate with a single male (tom), males are more expendable from a population standpoint.

Top Ten Turkey Trivia Tidbits

- a wild turkey's eyesight is 8x sharper than a human's
- wild turkeys can run at speeds of up to 19 kilometres per hour.
- at nighttime, they fly up into trees to roost
- in spring, males gather in clearings and court females by displaying and gobbling — one lucky tom will mate with several hens.
- when threatened, females tend to fly while males tend to run
- wild turkeys lay between 4-17 eggs
- newly hatched chicks (called poults) follow the female, who feeds them for a few days until they learn to find food on their own.
- winter groups sometimes exceed 200 turkeys
- a turkey's gender and age can be revealed by its droppings. Female droppings are spiral shaped, while male droppings are J-shaped. The larger the diameter, the older the bird.
- an adult turkey can have more than 6,000 feathers

<http://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/blog>

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-return-of-the-wily-wild-turkey/article1370597/>

<https://ottawasun.com/2017/10/13/growing-wild-turkey-population-takes-bite-out-of-ontario-forests/wcm/2150e107-ffad-4d31-8022-40883903fa90>