

# Spanning the Gap

## The Elusive Wild Turkey



U.S. Dept. of the Interior  
National Park Service

*Spanning the Gap*  
The newsletter of  
Delaware Water Gap National  
Recreation Area  
Vol. 7 No. 1 Spring 1984

One of the most exciting -- and increasingly common -- wildlife experiences for visitors to the recreation area in recent years has been the sighting of wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*). The turkey, an original inhabitant of eastern United States, almost entirely disappeared from its original range during the 19th century as a result of land use changes, primarily land clearing and an increase in agriculture.

During the first third of the 20th century, the wild turkey was only occasionally observed in the northern portion of its original range, though the bird did increase in numbers in the southern portion of its range. Pronounced increases of wild turkeys and their range began to be noticed just prior to World War II, and in the early 1950's, the wild turkey demonstrated population expansions and growth throughout northern Virginia, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The expansion of range and increase in numbers took a further dramatic upswing during the 1960s and 1970s until now turkeys are common sight throughout their original range, which is from southern Maine to the Gulf Coast.

Significant habitat changes throughout the Northeast, primarily mature and continuous woods, along with an increase of preferred available foods are given as the primary reasons for the dramatic increase in wild turkey numbers. While it has been the perseverance and ability of the bird to increase its numbers in areas of habitat improvement and protection, a great deal of credit for the range expansion of turkeys must also be given to several state fish and wildlife agencies for their efforts to redistribute turkeys in sections of their states where



(Above) The male turkey, the "gobbler" of the species, can stand 4 feet tall. The Tom displays a fan tail with red-brown tips, not white tips as in the domestic turkey. Both male and female may have the "beard" on the breast, but the male has an intensely bluish/reddish wattle. (NPS photos by Warren Bielenberg)

good turkey habitat existed, but birds were no longer present.

A case study of re-introduction is the wild turkey in New Jersey. For years the wild turkey was an infrequent visitor to the east side of the Delaware Valley north of the Water Gap. However, the turkey never really became abundant until re-introduction efforts took place in 1977. During the spring of that year 23 turkeys were released in the Delaware and Flat Brook Valleys -- 16 females from Vermont and 7 males from New York -- the only release of a pure strain of turkeys from outside the state. By the summer of 1980 the New Jersey turkey population had reached a level where wildlife managers felt a limited spring hunt for turkeys could take place west of the Kittatinny Range in the spring of 1981. Hunting was limited to the male or *Tom* turkey. The three week season, limited to these areas, and limited to a total of 900 hunters resulted in a harvest of 71 Tom turkeys. A four week season in the same three areas in 1982 resulted in a harvest of 96 Toms.

To many outdoorsmen the chance to lure in a Tom turkey in the spring is rarely exceeded by any other single visit to the outdoors. Calling in a highly suspicious and wary Tom gives one a tremendous sense of satisfaction and a healthy appetite for existence.

But whatever your interest is, whether it be for a wildlife observation or to hunt the wily male turkey, ample opportunity exists in the recreation area. Tom turkeys begin "gobbling" by late March, reaching a climax by April or early May. These are the times to be in the woods to look for your bird.

Those interested in hunting spring gobblers should check with the respective state wildlife code for that state where they expect to hunt for information regarding turkey hunting regulations. Within the recreation area, additional federal regulations apply.



(Above) A turkey strolls the park (NPS photo by Don Mitchison)



(Above) The female is streamlined and about a foot smaller than the male, with a smaller head, less iridescence, and only an occasional "beard". Females are often seen together, A mother may cluck like a hen at her brood. (NPS photo by Maria Berde)



Wild turkey eggs are buff-colored with brown speckles and are laid on the ground in a shallow, lined depression.