

NATURE DETECTIVES

Fall 2014



The Truth About Wild Turkeys

The first funny thing you may have learned about turkeys is that you can draw one by tracing around your hand placed palm down on a piece of paper. You probably added a beak and stick legs and maybe a wing. To be honest, that drawing doesn't look much like a wild turkey.

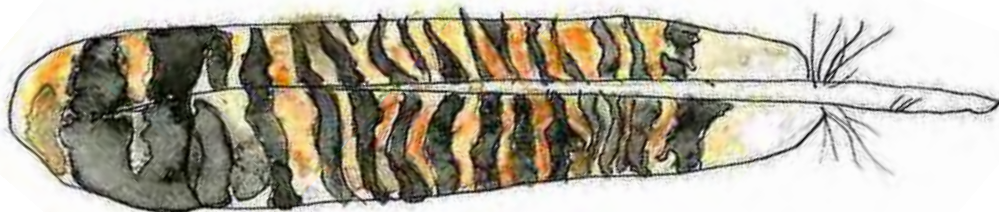
Pull Out and Save

Like that handprint turkey, some information about wild turkeys has little to do with reality. Misinformation spreads when facts about farm turkeys are thought to be facts about wild turkeys.

Farm turkeys and wild turkeys are the same species, but over hundreds of years they have become very different. Generations of farmers selected turkeys for their meatiness, not their survival abilities. Farmers pick only certain turkeys to have chicks; the especially meaty ones are likely to produce meaty offspring. In the wild, turkeys with the best survival traits live long enough to have chicks. These chicks inherit wily instincts and a robust, lean body type.

Survival of the Fittest: a comparison between wild and farmed

Wild Turkeys	Farm Turkeys
Strong survival instincts	Clueless about survival
Excellent wilderness skills	Die quickly in the wild
Lean body for a fast, flying take-off	Too heavy to fly
Legs well-built for walking and running	Legs built to support big body
Woodsy-colored feathers for camouflage	White feathers on most



Turkeys Here, There and Back Again

Wild turkeys are found only in North America, and they've been here a really long time. Fossil evidence shows their existence in North America for at least 5 million years. Hundreds of years ago, tribes living in pueblos and cliff dwellings kept turkeys. Early European explorers took some of these birds home to their country's farmers. When the first European colonists came to live in America, they brought back some farm-raised turkeys on the boats with them.



Americans continued to hunt wild turkeys also. Unlimited hunting plus clearing the land of vegetation to make farms and towns soon made wild turkeys scarce. By the 1930's people wanted to bring back wild turkeys to habitats where they'd disappeared. It took twenty years of trying to figure out how, but they finally succeeded.

Habitat for Turkeys



Turkeys need habitats with high, safe places for roosting at night, and open areas for finding food. They need shrubby areas for nesting. Boulder County foothills provide great turkey habitat. Turkeys roost in ponderosa pines that border meadows or open fields and in cottonwoods along streams. They will travel up to five miles a day to find safe roosts and good feeding areas. Water from a little spring or creek nearby makes it perfect.

Watch for turkeys feeding on the ground in early morning or late evening in a meadow or by a dirt road or trail near tall trees. Walker Ranch, Heil Valley Ranch and Hall Ranch are good turkey spotting locations.

Stalking Turkeys

It is fun for hikers to see turkeys, but for predators hunting for dinner it is serious business. Mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats, golden eagles and owls will tackle adult turkeys. Raccoons, skunks, foxes, opossums, bull snakes and large birds will snatch unguarded eggs and straying chicks.

Tough Turkey Defenses

Tasty wild turkeys need good defenses from predators. It helps to have terrific eyesight for spotting danger. With eyes on the sides of their heads, turkeys can see almost completely behind as well as forward. Keen hearing helps them survive too. They will run, but they can also suddenly rocket straight up into the air. With quick wing beats they reach 35 mph in just a few seconds. They've been clocked at 50 mph for a short distance. They can also kick their feet to swim, their wings tucked against their bodies and their tails spread wide.



Turkey Day

Turkeys stir in their high roosts at sun-up. The males (toms) gobble and the females (hens) make softer sounds. Soon they glide down and walk to a good feeding place.

Unless the toms are looking for mates, the males flock together. The females without chicks are in another flock and the hens with chicks in yet another flock. The juvenile males also hang out together in their own flock. The birds spend a lot of time vocalizing to keep together. Birds in each flock squabble with each other to determine who's top bird in the flock and the pecking order for all the rest. In winter flocks may combine.

Mid-day they rest or take dust baths or hens may tend nests. Afternoons they slowly walk around feeding again. As the sun sets, they fly back to their roosts and pick a good spot to spend the night.

As they walk, they scratch and peck at tidbits on the ground and on plants. They look for tasty leaves, fruits, seeds and nuts and a few insects. During harsh, cold and snowy periods in winter, turkeys may stay in their roosts. They can survive two weeks without food. Turkeys live about three years on average.



tom turkey



Babies Grow Up Fast

In spring tom turkeys strut through the female flocks, gobbling loudly. Gobblers can be heard a mile away. As the four-foot-tall toms parade around, their shiny metallic-looking brown feathers reflect blue, purple and bronze. They fan their tails made of long feathers tipped in creamy white. Their bald heads blush red. Each hen chooses the tom to father her chicks, but she is on her own raising them.

Hens have sparse, short feathers on their bluish-gray heads and are half the size of males. Dull brown feathers help camouflage hens when they are sitting on the nest. Creamy feather tips on their fronts look lighter than the dark feathers of the toms.

Nests are scrapes on the ground, hidden under shrubbery.

The hen lays an egg every day for 10 to 12 days. Starting when all the eggs are in the nest, the hen sits on them for a month until they hatch. The hen calls her day-old chicks to follow her. They abandon the nest and scurry after her, pecking at everything they see but eating mostly insects.

After a month, chicks have enough feathers to fly up to the safety of the roost.

By fall they are mostly grown.



Colorful Tom Turkey

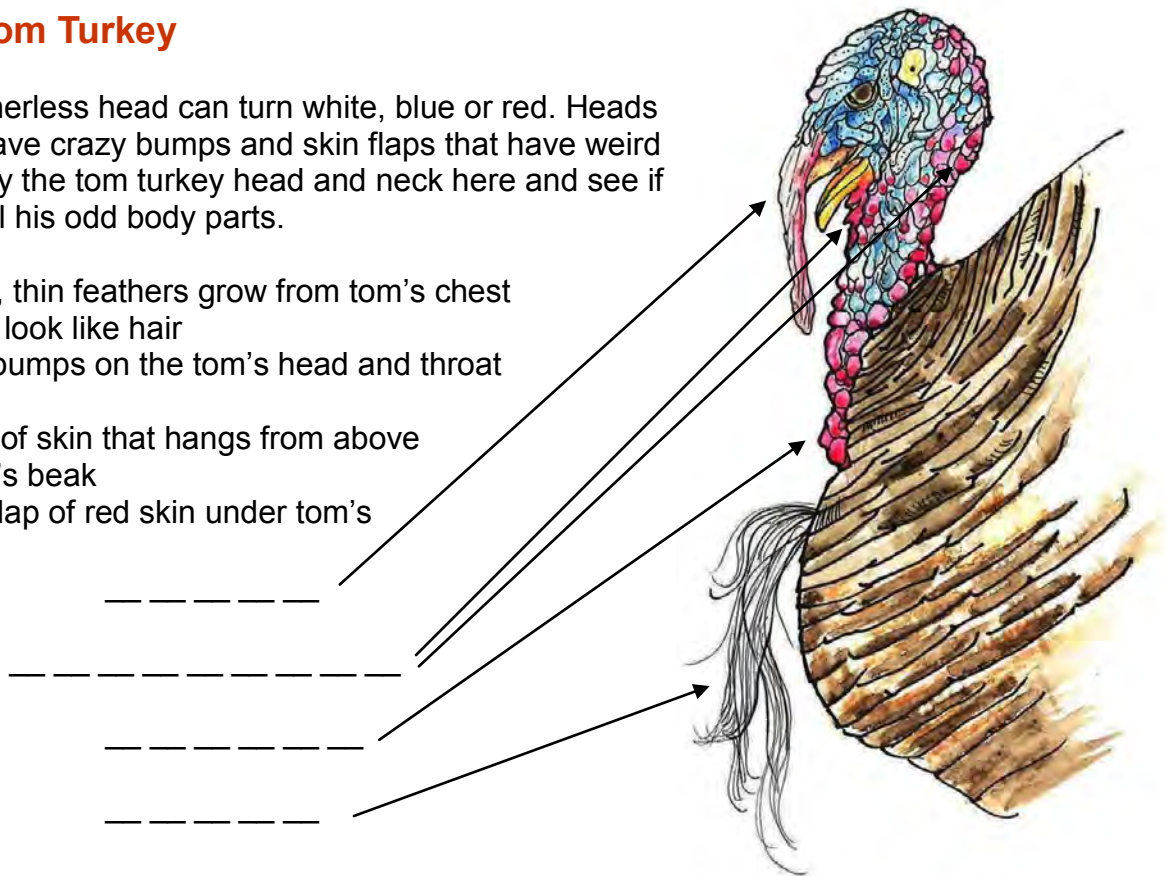
A tom's featherless head can turn white, blue or red. Heads and necks have crazy bumps and skin flaps that have weird names. Study the tom turkey head and neck here and see if you can label his odd body parts.

beard – long, thin feathers grow from tom's chest and look like hair

caruncles – bumps on the tom's head and throat

snood – flap of skin that hangs from above tom's beak

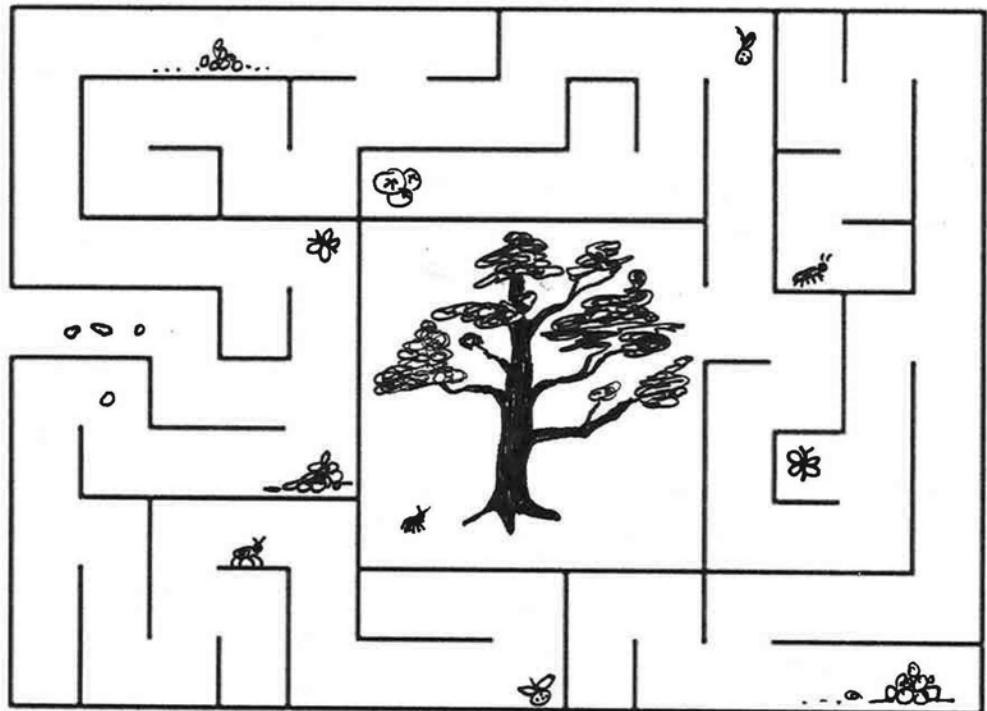
wattle – big flap of red skin under tom's chin



Turkey Maze

Can you color this tom turkey and help him find his way to the roost?

Of course, he will need to eat along the way.



Look on **page 13** for information on a **program** about our **wild turkeys**.