

Wild Turkey

by Linda Spielman

Spring is bustin' out all over, and wild turkeys are doing their part to celebrate the season. The large flocks so often seen in winter have broken up and you may catch sight of a lone bird crossing a road or trail. Males are roaming in search of females, emitting gobbles which can be heard up to a mile away. Females announce their interest with sharp yelps, and the hopeful toms respond with spectacular displays. They fluff up their body plumage, fan out their tail feathers, and hold their wings in a stiff drooping position. Their heads are held up and back and the fleshy appendages on their necks turn bright red with engorged blood. Gobblers move about in a stately strut with wings dragging on the ground, and their booming gobbles echo through the forest. The birds favor places where they can move around unimpeded. At Hammond Hill, forest roads and empty log landings provide the right kinds of openings, and these locations also happen to be good tracking spots. In silty or dusty patches you might find the strange undulating gouges produced by the dragging primary feathers.

While the males display, the females continue feeding and appear to be uninterested in the gobblers' antics. However, the hens are actually paying close attention to the size, strength, and stamina of their suitors. Once a hen selects a suitable candidate she allows him to approach and mating takes place without further ado. The male then continues his efforts to attract other females and the hen goes off in search of a secluded nesting site. She lays ten or more eggs in a simple depression on the ground and incubates them for about a month, leaving the nest only occasionally for short bouts of feeding. Bad weather during this time can be deadly for the developing embryos, and the hen does all she can to keep her clutch dry and warm. Any predator that comes upon a sitting hen will also try to scare her off and make a meal of the eggs.

In spite of losses, many eggs do complete their development, and the baby birds use their egg tooth to struggle out of the eggs. Soon after hatching the baby birds can walk, and they follow their mother to feeding areas nearby. Turkeys eat a wide variety of foods, but for growing young ones invertebrates and small vertebrates are most important. By scratching the forest litter aside the birds locate beetles, earthworms, grubs, caterpillars, slugs, millipedes, and even the occasional salamander. This is a dangerous time for the flightless poults, which are preyed on by raccoons, foxes, skunks, minks, coyotes, snakes, and hawks. The hen is constantly on the alert, and if she detects danger she emits sharp alarm calls which send the downy little things running in all directions. This behavior makes it more difficult for a predator to focus on a single bird, and once hidden the young birds' mottled brown coloring helps them to disappear. Several times I have come upon a hen with her young offspring, and I will attest that the mad scattering of small bodies combined with the shrill calls of the mother is very confusing.

The young turkeys grow quickly and their down is gradually replaced by wing and contour feathers. By their fourth week they are capable of flying and their period of greatest vulnerability ends. But they still have a lot to learn. They must try out new foods, develop their flying skills, learn about feeding and roosting sites, and become familiar with the habits of predators. The hen may put aside her solitary lifestyle and join with other turkey families. In these flocks the acute senses of several adults usually insure that any threat is detected early.

If you catch sight of a summer flock you may notice that there are several different sizes of juveniles. Hens which lose their first clutch will often breed again, and the second brood may hatch a month or more later than the earlier broods. Late hatchlings may still be undersized when fall comes, and winter's challenges will be harder on them. Even during the easy times of summer, young turkeys supply some of the calories for coyotes, bobcats, and other predators. When I find the remains of a turkey in the woods it reminds me of interlocking lives of wild creatures. Wild turkeys depend on healthy forest ecosystems to provide them with food and shelter, and predators—and their offspring—depend on prey like turkeys for their own survival. The behaviors of all parties have been fine-tuned by their interdependence, and in a healthy ecosystem neither predator nor prey has an overwhelming advantage.