

Eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*)

Size:

Males (toms) weigh 11–25 lbs; females (hens) weigh 8–12 lbs. Young are called “poults.”

Signs of their presence:

- Sightings of the bird. Often seen feeding in fields or flying over roads.
- Feathers and droppings.
- Scratchings: In the spring and fall, can see scratchings on the ground under nut and fruit trees. When searching for food in the woods, turkeys usually scratch, kicking the leaves back and to the side as they feed. Then they switch feet. This leaves an inverted “V” mark.
- Tracks: Good bet it’s a turkey if the distance from the tip of the middle toe to the back of the heel is greater than 4”. Near water, you might confuse their tracks for those of the Great blue heron.
- Nest: A simple depression, usually 8–10” in diameter, made when the hen rubs her breast into the leaves. The nest is usually found in brushy areas, such as near raspberry bushes, fallen branches, along the edge of a weedy field, and in a brushy field that’s changing back to forest.
- Sounds: Males gobble, usually as part of their courtship display (but may gobble while roosting, too). Hens cluck, purr, and cackle in response. Gobbling is most commonly heard in the early morning but during the breeding season, the toms may gobble at any time of day. The sound may be heard up to a mile away. Both toms and hens make a variety of other noises, including yelps, purrs, and cackles.

Diet:

Omnivores. Turkeys will eat insects, salamanders, small frogs, and plants. Their diet changes seasonally.

Spring: They’ll eat nearly any available plant, such as grass shoots; sedges; buds, flowers, and leaves of shrubs and trees; the roots, tubers, and bulbs of perennials; dried fruits; and nuts.

Spring and summer: High-protein foods, such as insects, spiders, centipedes, millipedes, snails, and slugs are critical to their poults. Adults eat those foods, as well as grasses, seeds, salamanders and frogs.

Late summer: Grasshoppers, beetles, crickets, and the fruits and seeds of nearly any plant.

Fall: just about any nut or fruit crop, including acorns, beechnuts, hazelnuts, wild cherries, and grapes; waste grain; insects; salamanders, and frogs.

Winter: Nuts and seeds; grains, including corn; insects; and snails. They’ll often feed where deer have pawed

through deep snow and in corn fields, especially if manure was spread on the field, and in spring seeps.

Typical activity patterns:

Social style: Gregarious. Several hens and their broods may flock together during mid-summer into fall. From the end of the breeding season through the summer, bachelor flocks are common, and usually stay together through late winter. But in late fall, a few of the toms may join the flocks of hens and poults. During the winter, several flocks may congregate in areas with good food supplies.

Daily activity: Diurnal. Turkeys are active throughout the day, depending on the weather.

While feeding in a part of their range, they tend to roost in the same area each night. During periods of deep snow, they may stay on the roost for several days.

Hibernator? No.

Migrates? No.

Where found:

Distribution in NY and the Northeast: Stable or increasing throughout the region; more common outside of the Adirondacks.

Habitat: Turkeys are highly adaptable but do best in areas that offer mature woods, clearings, and fields. They roost in large trees and feed under the hardwoods, in openings, and in agricultural fields. In the winter, they seek south-facing slopes with hardwoods (for nuts) and springs and seeps (for insects and salamanders). Turkeys are also found near corn fields, orchards, dairy farms (especially those with available silage and fields spread with manure), pastures, and in suburban areas next to those habitats.

Territory and home range: Turkeys move around a lot, seeking nesting sites in the early spring, brood areas in the summer, and woodland cover in the fall. In the early winter, they often move from forested or hilly country to agricultural areas, where they may depend heavily upon grain left in the fields after harvest and seeds they can pick out of manure. These seasonal movements can be significant in some regions—a flock may range over many square miles. In the winter and during nesting, their home range is often limited to 100–200 acres.

Breeding habits:

Pair bonding style: Polygamous.

Breeding dates: Late March–June.

Egg-laying dates: April–July. They lay one egg each day, for about 13 days (but may skip a day). Hens lay one

clutch but will nest again if their eggs are destroyed.

Clutch size: 8–15, usually 13.

Eggs hatch: About 28 days after the female begins incubating the eggs. The poults leave the nest right after hatching, to forage for insects with the hen, usually in a clearing or field. They can fly when they're about 10 days old. Poults chill easily until they're about 5 weeks old, so the female will brood them when it's damp or cool.

Amount of time young remain with hen: Until the flock breaks up the next spring. At that time, the young seek their own home ranges. Young males may disperse earlier than young female turkeys.

Common nuisance situations:

Time of year: Any time of year.

Turkeys are often blamed for crop damage that was caused by another species. These large birds are easily seen in the fields during the day, but they may be eating insect pests—not the crop! Remember to investigate carefully, looking for tracks, toothmarks, and other animal signs that will help you find the real culprit.

What are they doing?

- Eat crops, such as grapes, berries, corn, and small grains. They'll eat mature corn in the field, harvested corn from outside storage cribs, and may damage newly-planted seeds and seedlings.
- They eat dairy silage and may occasionally peck holes in the covers protecting the silage, which can cause it to spoil.
- Tear up turf on golf courses (the greens) and newly-established lawns.

Although uncommon, NWCOs may receive more calls about these behaviors:

- Dig up flower beds and home gardens. (They've been reported nesting in a flower bed next to a home.)
- They may peck and scratch at cars and other reflective surfaces, such as windows.
- Their droppings may foul cars, decks, and porches, and other areas.
- They'll sometimes stop traffic as they pause while crossing roads. They can pose a hazard to planes on runways (not often in the air, as do other birds).
- Turkeys may act aggressively toward people or pets, usually during their mating season in the spring.

Legal status in New York:

Protected. Game species with set seasons. A special permit from the DEC is needed to kill nuisance wild turkeys.

Best practices

Reduce food sources and roost sites:

- If anyone is feeding the turkeys, persuade them to stop.
- Keep the area underneath bird feeders clean.
- Rake up and remove nuts and fruits, if possible.
- Plant a taller variety of corn to keep the ears out of the turkeys' reach, or one with a tighter husk, so the kernels are better protected.
- Replace flowering bulbs and other vulnerable plants with varieties they find less tasty.
- Trim branches or remove trees from favored roosts.
- Removing brushy cover from nearby nesting sites may help reduce local populations in the future.

Protect people and vulnerable objects:

- If a turkey is behaving aggressively, try to scare it away. Establish yourself as the "top turkey." Wave your arms, make noise, threaten the bird with a broom, spray it with water from a hose—just don't harm it—that's illegal, in this situation.
- Park the car in a garage, or as far away from the wooded side of the parking lot as practical, or keep it covered. Cover the rear-view mirror with a paper bag to reduce its reflectivity. (For those who don't like to wash their cars, this can be an excuse. A dirty car won't be as reflective, either.)
- Cover windows or any reflective surface that the birds are pecking or scratching with tarps or opaque plastic sheets.

Protect vulnerable sites:

- Fencing may keep them away from a small area that the turkeys aren't using much, such as a deck, porch, or flower garden. A two-foot fence should be adequate, because turkeys usually try to walk around fences rather than fly over them.
- If it's possible, totally enclose the area with the barrier, perhaps adding netting as a cover for the fence (they can fly).
- Frightening noises from propane cannons or bangers may work.

Wild turkeys

- Remote-activated sprinklers, windmills, mylar balloons, scarecrows, and predator models may also scare off the turkeys.
- Patrol dogs (larger breeds that run and chase, such as border collies or terriers) may be able to chase turkeys out of vineyards, orchards, and other enclosed areas. Dogs must be trained to chase but not capture the birds. Some growers place platforms in the enclosure, to give the dogs a better view of the area.
- You can suggest that your customers allow hunting on their land. This may help to reduce local populations and alleviate some of the pressure on the site.

Trapping strategies:

It's unlikely that a NWCO will trap turkeys to solve a nuisance problem, because of several practical issues. You need a special DEC permit, specialized equipment, and it tends to take a lot of time and effort. No lethal traps are approved or even available for turkeys. The nonlethal methods described above are a much more practical approach to dealing with the problem, especially in urban areas.

Preferred killing methods:

- Shooting, using a shotgun with # 4, 5, or 6 shot, or center fire or rimfire rifle
- CO₂ chamber
- Stunning and decapitation
- Lethal injection of barbiturate, if possible

Acceptable killing methods:

- Stunning and cervical dislocation

Control strategies that don't work particularly well, or aren't legal in New York:

- There are no pesticides (including repellents) registered in New York for use against turkeys.
- Repellents that are based on odor or taste wouldn't be worth the effort, anyway, because turkeys have a poor sense of smell and taste.
- Any night-time efforts, because turkeys roost in trees at night.
- Conventional fencing is unlikely to work in large areas, or areas that are used heavily, because the turkeys will probably just fly over the fence. If the attractant is strong—such as a crop—the fence isn't

as likely to work. It may be impractical, impossible, or too costly to add a netting top to the fence.