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The Wild Turkey: Journey of a Noble Bird

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TURKEY
Wade Parsons

*The Wild Turkey:
Journey of a Noble Bird*

For many Kansas residents over forty, we can remember the first time we saw a wild turkey, just as a person's first sighting of a deer was a notable experience in many areas prior to the 1960's. Wild turkeys were abundant residents here prior to and during the early years of European-American settlement, but N. S. Gross reported that they were "nearly



extinct" in 1891 when he published the first History of the Birds of Kansas. Turkeys were good table fare, and that led to their demise in the 19th century.

For some species, conservation came too late in the 20th Century, resulting in extinction, as with Eskimo curlews, passenger pigeons, and Carolina parakeets. For others, most specifically the big mammalian predators, accommodation and conservation have never been extended to their kind in Kansas.

Wild turkeys were absent from the state for a solid half-century. Then, given legal protection, some ventured in from surviving populations of the forest-oriented "Eastern" subspecies in Missouri and the "Rio Grande" subspecies in more western Oklahoma. That natural "border crossing" re-population was dramatically enhanced as the red carpet was rolled out and others were brought in from nearby states and moved about within as they began to flourish in some vicinities. The

investment was enhanced by the fact that turkeys were a sporting bird, a promising attraction for hunters, and also an inviting prospect for other wildlife enthusiasts and many landowners.

My father looked forward to the time they would colonize the family farm in Washington County. In the 1980's my wife and I purchased two modest ranch properties in the northern Flint Hills. Less than a year later I was encouraged to discover turkey tracks and a feather. Two gobblers and three hens established local residency during the courtship and nesting season the following spring. That fall I surprised a flock of twenty-two, mostly poults-of-the-year. They were searching for acorns under Chinquapin oaks. There were exactly forty-four in a flock observed in the same spot a year later. The rest is history! Wild turkeys haven't increased exponentially and doubled annually, but they have achieved numbers within the carrying capacity of the habitat and continue to do well.

John James Audubon's paintings of these colorful birds are among the most popular of his illustrations. His fascination was also illustrated by the written detail of his observations of this noble bird. He wrote, "I have been much diverted, while watching two males in fierce conflict...." He added that in late winter and early spring when "They begin to experience the impulses of propagation" the gobblers "puff and strut, moving with as much celerity as their ideas of ceremony seem to admit. While thus occupied the males often encounter each other, in which case desperate battles take place...."

Nothing compares to the courtship rituals of a group of male greater prairie-chickens. However, for the person who isn't in a position to be in a blind an hour before sunrise and remain hidden for hours on a prairie ridge, watching long-bearded gobblers spread their huge tails and display their vanity is a worthy and more achievable alternative. Human disturbances can be highly



WILD TURKEYS

disruptive to the breeding, nesting, and brood rearing of prairie-chickens. Wild turkeys are much more adaptable; they can often be observed in bottomland fields or along the prairie woodland edge from the comfort of a parked vehicle.

Their relative tolerance of people and adaptability led to domestication by the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples. Although domestic turkeys have lost many of their survival skills, wild turkeys are programmed to be alert and are highly wary when circumstances require. Hens on nests, eggs, and young poults

are most vulnerable to predation from raccoons, coyotes, and bobcats. Weather and habitat conditions are major factors determining survival. Hunting, regulated by state wildlife agencies and controlled by landowners, is consistent with conservation and management objectives. It is illegal to shoot wild turkeys in trees, an important consideration because they are vulnerable at communal night roosting sites.

As Goss pointed out in text intermingled with that of Audubon, during “the summer months the birds

usually leave the timber lands in the morning, and wander far out upon the prairies, in search of grasshoppers, etc., returning at eve to their favorite roosting places in the branches of the tall trees, preferring those that overhang the streams." That behavior continues to this day, and I have noted that their favorite trees for roosting in the Flint Hills are large sycamore trees along streams. The open area over the streams provides clear airspace for their upward flight to the higher branches. Sycamores are often tall and have unique branches idea for roosting. Many of the major limbs are horizontal and extend for ten or fifteen feet without obstructing branches. The same openness also makes groupings of sycamores favorite colonial nesting sites (referred to as heron "rookeries") for great-blue herons.

Although wild turkeys feed primarily on hackberries, acorns, and other seeds from trees, shrubs, vines, and forbs, along with "greens" of various kinds, they are omnivorous and are

prodigious eaters of insects. They are especially beneficial at controlling grasshoppers. A family friend visiting from Italy, for the purpose of hunting deer and turkeys on our property, indicated that domestic turkeys are used to "control vipers" in Italy. Wild turkeys feed on some undetermined number of small snakes and lizards as they scratch through leaves and stalk through vegetation in search of food. It seems that we don't have as many copperheads now, but that observation only leads to speculation.

Because wild turkeys increased dramatically during the past thirty years, coincidentally during the same timeframe when bobwhite quail numbers plummeted, there is a widely held myth that one is responsible for eating the young of the other. Contrary to that suggestion, wild turkeys are not velociraptors, devouring everything in their path. Agriculture has changed leaving few weedy patches in fields for summer brood cover, while essential



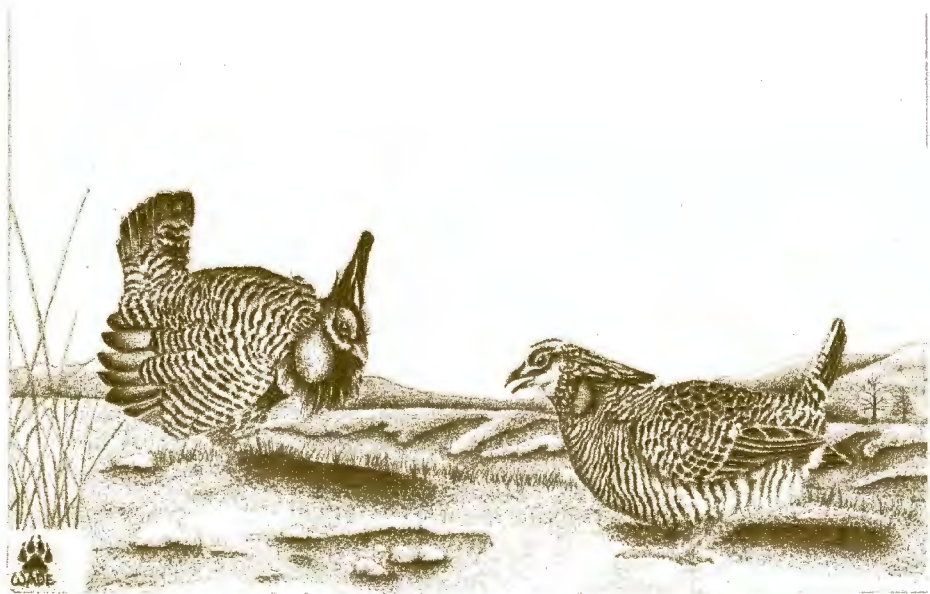
WILD TURKEY FIGHT

bushy thickets and odd patches of grass needed throughout the year by bobwhite quail have been dramatically eliminated.

Wild turkeys are more adaptable to recent changes in agricultural practices and they can thrive in cultivated landscapes with a mix of grain crops if there are large trees or timbered areas for roosting, water, and places to nest. They are closely associated with stream systems within the Flint Hills. The opportunity to see them without being

detected has added another dimension to the thrill of walking through the hills and woodlands, especially for those of us who are still kids at heart and love every discovery. It is also a delight to hear them gobble on spring mornings and evenings, sometimes even at night when they respond from the relative security of roost trees to the hooting of owls and the sunset howling of coyotes.

Ron Klataske is the Executive Director of Audubon of Kansas.



PRAIRIE CHICKENS

NOTES

Then the sun began to shout from below the horizon.
Throngs of birds campaigned, their music a tent of sound.

William Stafford