

Turkeys

Wildlife management series for Midwestern farmers



Wild turkey.

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Common and Latin name: Wild turkey (*Melagris gallopavo*)

Commonly impacted crops: Wild turkeys are known to damage a wide range of field crops, fruits, vegetables, ginseng and stored animal feed.

Relevant regulatory agency: State Department of Natural Resources.

Species overview

Physical description: Wild turkeys are large, upland ground birds with long legs, wide and rounded tail feathers, long necks and small heads with light red and blue coloration, which is more pronounced in males. They have dark, bronze-green iridescent feathers over most of their bodies. Adult males have a tuft of coarse hair known as a “beard” at their breast and weigh 15 to 35 pounds; females average 8 to 11 pounds.

Habitat and range description: Wild turkey habitat includes areas next to rivers and streams, oak forests, pine savannas, forest clearings, grasslands, meadows, farm fields and pastures. Forested areas are often used for daytime resting, escape cover and nighttime roosting. Grasslands and other open areas are used primarily for foraging. Although originally thought to be limited to large, remote, forested areas, wild turkeys have adapted to a variety of habitats including farms, suburbs and even some urban areas.

Behavior: Wild turkeys are omnivorous ground feeders that forage on plants and animals, including nuts, seeds, fruits, insects and small reptiles. At night, turkeys roost in tall trees for protection from predators and weather. Turkeys typically feed soon after leaving their roosts early in the morning and

again in mid- to late afternoon before heading back to their roosts. Turkeys are social creatures and form flocks in the fall based on sex and age, with the largest (often single-sex) groups forming during winter. The foraging of these large groups can create a nuisance in a concentrated area.

Identification of damage: During the growing season, turkeys can be found feeding on sprouting or waste corn, soybeans, small grains and vegetable crops. Turkeys may cause damage to fruit orchards, vineyards and other specialty crops by directly consuming fruit. They can also cause damage indirectly by scratching or dust-bathing near crops, especially when plants are mulched or bedded. Wild turkey damage also occurs in stored silage, hay and straw from birds scratching to find loose grain during winter.



Catherine Lindell, Michigan State University

Turkeys typically completely remove fruit, leaving only the stem behind. They feed most heavily in lower plant parts that they can access from the ground.



Adults in a field.

Turkeys, especially in large flocks, are often mistakenly blamed for crop damage during the growing season. Research conducted in Wisconsin indicated turkeys were actually responsible for 18 percent of the reported crop damage incidents, with other incidents due to raccoon and deer. Insects are the main part of a turkey’s diet this time of year, and the birds often forage for them in crop fields.

Turkeys cause damage indirectly to cultivated ginseng. Turkeys, looking for insects, will scratch through mulch used to provide thermal protection to ginseng root during cold conditions. If turkeys scratch the mulch off ginseng, the root often freezes and dies.

Management strategies

Legal status: Wild turkeys are a valuable game bird and are managed by state wildlife agencies. States regulate the harassment, management and control of wild turkeys when they cause damage. Regulations vary by state.

No single management method to prevent wild turkey damage works all the time or in all settings. Generally, multiple management methods should be combined so that one method enhances the effects of another.

Exclusion: Excluding wild turkeys from large areas is difficult as they easily fly over low fences. However, fencing or tarps can exclude turkeys from small areas like silage storages. Silage damage by turkeys can be reduced by laying tarps or fencing on top of the silage bags or bunkers.

Harassment: Harassment using human or other animal activity such as a dog in an area frequented by wild turkeys can be an effective deterrent. Propane cannons and pyrotechnics will also disperse turkeys from crop fields or stored feed. Use harassment as soon as turkeys appear to prevent them from developing a habit of feeding in

a particular area. Harassment is effective when naïve birds encounter the devices. Any deterrence with harassment methods is soon lost as birds become habituated, but efficacy can be increased when reinforced with lethal control by shooting.

Repellents: Methyl anthranilate, a nontoxic, biodegradable food ingredient, can be sprayed on crops, grass, structures or other areas to keep birds away. This repellent will repel numerous bird species. Birds find it highly irritating, but to humans it simply smells like grapes. It can be purchased under the name Avian Control. Once applied, this product is effective for approximately 10 to 14 days. It is more likely practical on a small scale such as a garden or silage bags.

Shooting: Regulated hunting seasons are the most used form of lethal control. Turkeys may only be hunted by individuals possessing a valid turkey hunting license or turkey stamp during a state’s turkey hunting seasons. Consult your local or state hunting laws for further information. While relatively few turkeys may be taken this way, hunting may deter turkeys from that particular property. In circumstances where turkeys are causing agricultural damage, state wildlife agencies may issue permits that allow landowners to shoot nuisance turkeys.

Assistance in Wisconsin: Turkeys are one of the species listed in Wisconsin’s Damage Abatement and Claims Program (WDACP). This program provides assistance in minimizing and preventing turkey damage, as well as partial compensation for crop losses. More information about the WDACP can be found by contacting your local Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources office.

Considerations

Wild turkeys, though once rare, have experienced substantial population growth from improved habitat and population management. This resurgence is one



Wild turkey tracks in snow.

of the great American conservation success stories of the 20th century and has restored a highly valued species on the landscape. Turkeys are large, very visible birds that frequently forage in crops fields, but may feed on insects or waste grain and not damage crops. In some areas, however, increased turkey populations have led to occasional damage to property and agricultural crops. The damage caused by turkeys should be balanced against their benefits including control of insect pests such as Japanese beetles. Farmers that receive damage from turkeys may be able to recruit hunters to reduce turkey populations.

Acknowledgments

Drake, David, Cassandra Bublitz, Mike Preisler, Jason Suckow and Brad Koele. "Wild Turkey Ecology & Damage Management." G3997-01. 2013. <http://wildlifedamage.uwex.edu/pdf/WildTurkey.pdf>.

Miller, J.E. "Wild Turkeys." Wildlife Damage Management Technical Series. USDA, APHIS, WS National Wildlife Research Center. Fort Collins, Colorado. 2018. 12p.

Additional resources

Visit our Wildlife Management website for additional fact sheets on managing other wildlife

and for more resources: bit.ly/wildlife-mge

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service <https://www.fws.gov/offices/>

Your state's Department of Natural Resources or similar agency

Wildlife Services. "Livestock Protection Dogs." Fact Sheet. 2010. https://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/wildlife_damage/content/printable_version/fs_livestock_protection.pdf

Midwest directory of wildlife management agencies

Information from February 2019.

Illinois

Department of Natural Resources: (618) 435-8138
www.dnr.illinois.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (217) 241-6700

Indiana

Department of Natural Resources: (317) 232-4102
www.in.gov/dnr
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (765) 494-6229

Iowa

Department of Natural Resources: (515) 725-8200
www.iowadnr.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (573) 449-3033

Kansas

Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism:
(620) 672-5911 www.ksoutdoors.com
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (785) 537-6855

Michigan

Department of Natural Resources: (517) 284-6057
www.michigan.gov/dnr
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (517) 336-1928

Minnesota

Department of Natural Resources: (651) 296-6157
www.dnr.state.mn.us
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (651) 224-6027

Missouri

Department of Natural Resources: (800) 361-4827
www.dnr.mo.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (573) 449-3033

Nebraska

Department of Natural Resources: (402) 471-2363
www.dnr.nebraska.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (402) 434-2340

North Dakota

Game and Fish Department: (701) 328-6300
www.gf.nd.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (701) 355-3300

Ohio

Department of Natural Resources: (800) 945-3543
www.ohiodnr.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (614) 993-3444

South Dakota

Game Fish and Parks: (605) 223-7660 www.gfp.sd.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (701) 355-3300

Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources: (888) 936-7463
www.dnr.wi.gov
USDA APHIS Wildlife Services: (608) 837-2727



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