

Hill Country Wild Turkeys

There are three subspecies of wild turkey in Texas—the eastern turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*), Merriam's Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo merriami*) and the Rio Grande turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo intermedia*). The eastern turkey is found in roughly the eastern ¼ of the state, the Merriam's turkey in only the higher elevations of the Trans-Pecos region, and the Rio Grande turkey is found in a large fraction of the central part of the state from the coast to the pan handle.

The Rio Grande turkey is the only one found in the Hill Country or the Edwards Plateau. The visual differences in the three subspecies are fairly slight, the eastern being slightly darker in color and the Merriman's having whitish tail tips, compared to the Rio Grande. The gobbler or toms (males) of the Merriman's are the heaviest, up to 26 pounds, the eastern next, between 19 and 21 pounds and the Rio Grande average between 16 and 18 pounds. The hens (females) of each species are considerably smaller than the males.

Gobblers have a tuft of hair-like feathers hanging down from their breast called a "beard", but about 15% of hens have that also. Gobblers have a fleshy growth on top of their head called a "snood" that hangs down on the side of their face. The snood will elongate and become bright red when in the presence of a hen. Gobblers also have roundish red fleshy growths on their necks called "caruncles". Hens have very much smaller, less colored snoods and caruncles than gobblers.

Mating season in central Texas starts in late February or early March. Males display when anywhere in the presence of hens or just to compete with other males. They do not have a territory to defend and will mate with as many hens as they can. Gobblers do not take any role in nest building or rearing the young.

Hens preferred nest sites are among tall grass or short shrubs as cover for the nest and eggs. They also prefer water not to be too far away from the nest. Hens can lay up to as many as a dozen eggs over a two-week period—hatching occurs after about 28 days of incubation. Nest predation is a major factor in limiting the number of young (poults) produced.

Turkeys are in the order Galliformes, along with quail, grouse, pheasants, and chickens. They are characterized as having strong beaks and feet, scratching for their food, and having the young being able to walk and feed themselves within hours of hatching. Poults develop flight feathers and can fly to a roost within two weeks of hatching. Typically, a hen may hatch 8 to 10 poults but only two or three may survive through the summer.

Turkeys are usually seen in loose flocks, sometimes only a few individuals and at other times with as many as 30 or 40 birds slowly "grazing" through the pasture. We frequently see individual hens or small flocks of hens fly into our yard to scratch under the bird feeders for spilled sunflower seeds and/or to drink from the recirculating "creek"

we have in the back yard. They also just amble throughout the yard eating whatever grass or forb leaves they see that they like and searching for grasshoppers and other insects.

On two occasions we have had hens nest in tall grass under a tree in the front yard, which meant they had to fly over the fence every day to lay their eggs and then fly back over the fence to feed when incubating. The attraction was probably better cover inside the fence than in the overgrazed pasture outside.

Unfortunately, neither nesting hen was successful. The first had laid 8 to 10 eggs but then we saw a Texas rat snake with two eggs in its body crawling away one day and eventually all the eggs disappeared. The second nesting attempt was two or three years later in a similar spot. Egg laying was occurring but when only a few had been laid we found a bunch of tail feathers near the nest and no eggs one day. Shortly after that we saw a hen with no tail feathers, but otherwise apparently OK. Shortly after that, we saw a raccoon with a definite limp. You can write your own story about what may have happened.

It is obvious that ground nesting birds of all kinds need to attempt to raise large broods in order to have enough survive to maintain the population.

Until next time...

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