

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
Bureau of Biological Survey

DIVISION OF INFORMATION

FOR RELEASE MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1939.

The wild turkey, symbol of Thanksgiving Day, has been on the road to becoming a vanishing bird, but effective efforts are now being taken to save this feathered American, according to the Bureau of Biological Survey of the Department of the Interior.

Once common in favorable territory over most of the United States east of the Rocky Mountains and in the Southwest, the species rapidly disappeared from most of its favorite haunts and is now found only in restricted ranges.

What is being done to save and restore the wild turkey was explained in a Biological Survey report.

The rapid depletion in numbers of the bird that was a common source of food supply for the pilgrims of New England is said by some observers to have been caused by various factors, the most important of which probably was the influence of man.

The wild turkey is still of some importance as food for residents of certain remote areas. Its greatest economic value today, however, is as an object of sport, though it is largely insectivorous in its feeding habits.

Turkeys, although nonmigratory, are wide-ranging birds, requiring a larger area on which to roam than do most resident species. Some gobblers have been known to travel 15 miles from their roosts. When submarginal lands and wooded areas were taken over for farms, the turkey was driven off its best nesting and feeding grounds.

The turkey derived its name by way of England from Africa. In the seventeenth century, guinea fowl were transported from the Dark Continent to the British Isles. These birds were shipped via Turkey, for which country the English gave the name "turkey cocke" to the guinea fowl.

When the American bird was shipped to England, people became confused and began calling this species the turkey also. The term became popular and has been used for the American bird ever since. The turkey was Benjamin Franklin's choice for the National emblem.

Overshooting did not help the turkey's situation, Survey officials commented. In fact, large takes by too many hunters are in great part responsible for the scarcity of the wild turkey today.

Drawing a lesson from the past, when man carelessly permitted other species to die out, Federal agencies, State governments, private organizations, and individuals are taking steps to save the turkey.

Fortunately, attempts to restore its habitat and to increase its population are being made now, before the species comes too close to the danger point. On many of its original ranges throughout the country, however, it is already gone.

In the Ozark region of Missouri, it is pointed out, there is much excellent wild turkey range on which the bird once flourished. The species was nearly extirpated from this region. Now various organizations are spending thousands of dollars in an attempt to restore the bird to the area.

In Missouri, the Survey cooperates with the State college in its studies of the turkey's range, food habits, and other factors related to the management of the species. Since 1925, investigations have been conducted in counties where the bird is extinct or on the verge of being wiped out.

The Bureau of Biological Survey and other agencies are doing considerable work in other regions also. In South Carolina and other southeastern States, the Biological Survey has sent some of its best turkey experts to devise methods to protect the bird and increase its present population.

Virginia, too, remembers when the gobblers were abundant. Today the Biological Survey and its cooperating State organizations are bending every effort to give the wild turkey sufficient living space in the Old Dominion and to encourage it to breed and raise its flocks in larger numbers.

State interest in the problem is shown by the type of Federal Aid projects that are being proposed by State Game Commissions and approved by the Biological Survey. Under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, Congress appropriates funds to be used by the States for projects designed to benefit their wildlife.

Eleven States already are spending part of their allotments to study the turkey and methods of increasing its populations. Projects are under way in Alabama, Arizona, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

In some sections of the country, sportsmen, finding turkey hunting poor, have purchased lands upon which to conduct wild turkey management and do their hunting. Surplus stock may be liberated on club grounds and be hunted by members.

Breeding and nesting studies also are being made to learn more about the turkey's habits. Wild turkeys prefer to breed in rather dense woodlands, usually near a swamp or a stream. The birds nest on the ground and remain well concealed in tangled thickets.

Even during other seasons of the year, the wild turkey is adept at hiding. Experts often are unable to find a flock of turkeys even when they know the birds are in a certain locality.

Formerly the gobbler was easy to approach, but experience apparently has taught it to be wary of man, for now it is suspicious and difficult to reach.

That the wild turkey will ever be as numerous as it was in the early days is improbable, but certainly vigorous efforts are being made to preserve this important game bird. With Federal, State, and private resources available for wild turkey studies and management, the report concluded, the outlook for satisfactory return of the species is hopeful.