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All-American Bird

By Cynthia Berger

Wild **turkeys** are true all-American birds. When the first European settlers arrived here, they found *lots* of wild **turkeys** in the wilderness. And today, you can find them in every state except Alaska.

It seems as if these birds have always been part of American celebrations. The Aztec people--living in what is now Mexico--gave **turkeys** to their gods as holiday presents.

The Pilgrims ate wild turkey--along with fish, deer, and duck--at what many people call the First Thanksgiving.

Bet *you* eat a fat turkey on Thanksgiving Day too, right? But yours most likely isn't a wild bird. It's probably a farm-raised turkey--the kind sold in supermarkets. These are tasty birds, but they're not nearly as cool as their wild cousins!

A Real Patriot

In spring, the head of a male turkey often turns red, white, and blue like the one in the photo at left.* These colors tell female **turkeys**, "I'm ready for a mate!"

Turkey Trot

Hey, where are you birds off to? The **turkeys** below are trotting off to find a meal nearby. ([See picture. "Wild Turkeys."](#)) **Turkeys** mostly walk or run along the ground. But they're really fast fliers too--reaching speeds of 55 miles (88.5 km) per hour in short bursts.

Turkeys often hang out together in flocks. Some flocks are small, like this one. Others may have around 50 birds.

Feeding and Fighting

I Think I Can!



Like a giraffe, the turkey below* s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-s its neck. It's after a tasty berry. Wild **turkeys** scarf up lots of things besides berries, such as grains, nuts, roots, and insects.

These birds aren't fussy eaters. More than 600 different kinds of food show up on turkey menus! Sometimes **turkeys** even chomp down on frogs, lizards, and snakes. And in the fall **turkeys** scratch up leftover kernels from corn fields.

Face-Off

These two male **turkeys*** go beak to beak in a fight. The winner will get to mate with the nearby females.

See the pointed things on the backs of the birds' legs?* These are called spurs. Fighting males often jump high in the air and use their spurs to slash at each other with karate-like kicks. The birds can be injured or even killed from their wounds.

Bringing Up Babies

Fox Feast

Mama Turkey hid her nest among the bushes. But she didn't outfox this guy, did she?*

All wild turkey moms make their nests on the ground, not up in trees. A mama just scrapes away a little dirt. There she lays about a dozen eggs. Speckles on the eggs help blend them in with their surroundings. But even so, enemies such as foxes often find the eggs.

At hatching time Mom calls softly to the chicks inside the eggs. This may help the chicks know that it's time to come on out.

First Steps

Now check out this turkey chick!* Many baby birds are helpless at first. But not **turkeys**. This one, and its brothers and sisters, will soon be running off with Mom to a safe spot. And in a day or so the chicks will be finding their own food.

Goodnight, Sleep Tight

This mother turkey* has tucked most of her babies under her wing to keep them warm. One of them beats the chill by snuggling close to Mom's head.

This family is roosting (sleeping) in a tree. At first, the little **turkeys** couldn't fly and had to roost on the ground. But now they can flap up to a branch. Here the birds stay safe from most enemies.

The young **turkeys** will hang close to their mom for about a year. Then off they'll go on their own.

So, as you've seen, **turkeys** can be really wild birds--not just a tame and tasty treat on your Thanksgiving table!

Turkey Comeback

Turkeys have been showing up in lots of places lately, including--believe it or not--backyard birdfeeders.

Just 70 years ago, wild **turkeys** were nearly extinct. Why? People had turned many forests--favorite turkey hideouts--into farms. So with fewer places to live, **turkeys** became scarce. People also had killed too many of these birds for food. So there were hardly any left.

But today lots of farms have changed back to forests. And people have moved **turkeys** into them. The

birds have multiplied and spread out from there.

So now, wild **turkeys** have made a comeback--with millions of them in North America. And *that's* something to gobble about!

***Pictures referred to in this article are not available in this format but can be found in the original publication.**

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