

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

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Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*

This familiar upland game bird makes its presence known during the spring with loud, territorial gobbling. It breeds from Ontario to Florida and from Washington state to Mexico.

Habitat. Wild Turkeys generally prefer forested areas with scattered openings and sparse-to-moderate groundcover vegetation. In Florida, Turkeys are found in hardwood swamps and hammocks, cypress swamps, mixed hardwood-pine habitats, pine flatwoods, turkey oak ridges, the edges of dry prairies, and seasonally flooded sloughs, ponds, and marshes. Different habitats are needed for nesting, brood rearing, foraging, roosting, and escape. A preferred nesting habitat consists of dense, knee-high vegetation, such as low-growing saw palmetto. After the brood hatches, turkeys move to areas with a thin overstory of trees and low, grassy groundcover.

The diet of the adult Wild Turkey covers a broad range of food types that vary with seasonal availability. Acorns, grass seeds, other fruits and seeds, and insects are typically eaten (Williams 1981). Young Turkeys rely on a diet of insects, succulent vegetation, and green plant seeds.

The nest of the Wild Turkey is a shallow hollow on the ground, concealed in dense vegetation. Usually 8 to 12 eggs are laid, but clutches up to 20 eggs have been reported. They are pale buff to white and heavily spotted and speckled with brown or purplish-brown (Harrison 1978). Incubation is by the hen alone and takes approximately 28 days. The young are able to fly at about 14 days of age and are tended by the hen. The brood remains together until winter, and sometimes 2 or more broods will join together in a flock.

Seasonal Occurrence. These year-round Florida residents lay their eggs from early March through May.

Status. The Wild Turkey's range in Florida is well-known because the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] has devoted much effort to management and restocking programs. Overhunting reduced the Florida population to an estimated 26,000 birds in 1946. However, the population nearly quadrupled in the following 22 years, and 100,000 turkeys were estimated to occupy the state in 1970. In 1978, the eminent Wild Turkey authority, Lovett E. Williams Jr. (1971) published a map showing the distribution of the Wild Turkey in the state. This map was based on data gathered from biologists, game managers, and wildlife officers from 1973 to 1977. Publication of the Atlas map presents an opportunity to compare it with Williams' map and to monitor changes in the range of this interesting and economically important species.

Overall, the two maps are remarkably similar. Neither Williams nor the Atlas project found any Wild Turkeys in most of Suwannee County, the urban areas of Jacksonville and Tampa Bay, central Polk County, and along the border of Lake and Orange counties. The Atlas project failed to locate Wild Turkeys in some areas shown on Williams' map, such as Dixie, southern Levy, Citrus, northwest Hernando, western Volusia, eastern Hillsborough and mainland Monroe counties, but many of these areas were relatively inaccessible to Atlas fieldworkers. On t

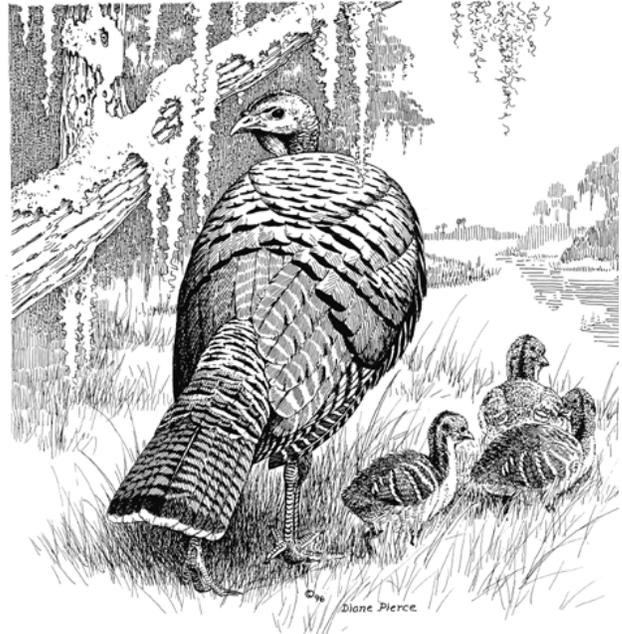


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other hand, the Atlas map depicts Wild Turkeys in areas not occupied by them according to Williams' map, most notably in central Okaloosa, Calhoun, northeast Taylor, Columbia, Marion, and eastern Lee counties. Although Williams' survey may have simply overlooked these birds, it is likely that Wild Turkeys have moved into these areas in recent years.

Confirming nesting Wild Turkeys is not easy; therefore, most Atlas fieldworkers made extensive use of hearsay information provided by local residents. The species is familiar to almost everyone, thus, information gathered this manner is undoubtedly reliable. Hearsay data are responsible for the large area of confirmed breeding records in Osceola County (C. W. Biggs, pers. commun.) Because they are relatively sedentary, it is likely turkeys breed in every quadrangle marked as "possible" or "probable."

Robert W. Loftin

Wild Turkey

