

# Wild Turkey



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The Wild Turkey is a game bird and is hunted for sport or food. By the early 20th century, hunting and habitat loss nearly wiped out the Wild Turkey in the US. However, huge effort was made to restock areas of the country and Wild Turkey stocks are now thriving.

## Are Turkeys from Turkey?

Turkeys do not originate from the country of Turkey. In the 1500s European explorers brought the Wild Turkey back to Europe from Mexico. At that time, the main trading route from the Americas and Asia was through Constantinople (now Istanbul), in Turkey. When the Wild Turkey arrived in England, they connected it with Turkey and that became the bird's name.



The Wild Turkey is native to North America and can be found from Mexico up into Canada. There are several sub-species of Wild Turkey, all of which have slightly different colouring and features, as well as behaviour and habitats.

Wild Turkeys are omnivorous, eating acorns and other nuts, seeds, berries and insects. Unlike the domesticated turkey, the wild turkey is a powerful flier. Its wings are designed for fast flight over short distances, however to conserve energy they usually walk.

The male of the eastern subspecies has a large body covered in bronze iridescent (blue/green sheen) feathers. Its head is featherless



head and its skin is pinkish-red with fleshy ornaments, called caruncles, on its throat and neck. During courtship, the skins turns bright blue and white and the caruncles becomes a bright red beard. It also puffs up its body and raises its tail feathers and makes a gobbling noise. The female is a lot slimmer and duller bird and usually does not have a beard.

## The Turkey Family

In Europe, a male turkey is known as a **stag** and in the US it is known as a **tom**. In Europe and the US, a female turkey is called a **hen** and the young turkey chick is called a **poult**.

Wild Turkeys nest on the ground in a bed of leaves or vegetation. It will lay 4-17 eggs and, as the male turkey may eat the eggs, the female hides the nest carefully. Once hatched, the young chicks follow their mother for a few days but quickly learn to fend for themselves.

## Domesticated Turkeys

Turkeys were first domesticated over 2,000 years ago from wild birds in Mexico.



Some domesticated turkeys are white.

Valued for its meat and eggs, as well as for its decorative feathers, the European explorers brought the turkey to England in the 1500s. It became very popular there, so much so that when the English began to colonise North America, they brought the bird back with them to its country of origin!

You can tell the difference between domesticated and wild turkeys from the colour of the tail tip feathers. The domesticated turkey has white tail tip feathers (a trait which goes back to the species that originated in Mexico), whereas Wild Turkeys generally have brown tail tips.

Turkey is still a popular meat in our diet and in many homes has replaced the traditional duck or goose as the centrepiece of our Christmas dinner. Turkey is also a huge part of the traditional Thanksgiving meal in the US, which is celebrated on the last Thursday of November each year.

