

by Christine Petersen

WILD Neighbors

A creature of woodlands, the **wild turkey** now lives across much of Minnesota, including in towns and cities.

It's a warm late-September evening in Minneapolis, perfect for a stroll. I head out the door and soon find myself on a winding path between the Mississippi River and tall buildings on the University of Minnesota campus. College students are hammocking in trees nearby. Others kick back on the still-green grass with textbooks in their laps or gather to toss a frisbee with friends. And right in the middle of it all stands a flock of wild turkeys.

The big birds look pretty relaxed,

like any other group enjoying a bit of downtime. A few students raise their phones to take pictures, but most ignore the large wild animals wandering across the parkway. The turkeys stop here and there to peck at the grass or gaze around. Then, as sunset approaches, they turn toward the river and disappear among the trees.

I turn too, finishing my walk as daylight fades. I think about wild turkeys with every step. What are the secrets of their survival, and have they always lived so close to people?

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A male wild turkey, called a gobbler or tom, fans out his tail feathers.



Tom turkeys can stand 40 inches tall and weigh more than 20 pounds.

Big Birds

More than 300 bird species live in Minnesota or regularly visit the state. None are quite like the wild turkey. Turkeys are round-bodied birds that usually feed on the ground. They share that habit with grouse and pheasants, which are their distant rela-

tives. But wild turkeys are much, much larger. Males, called *gobblers* or *toms*, can stand 40 inches tall and weigh more than 20 pounds—about the size of a Canada goose. Turkey hens aren't quite this big but still outweigh other ground-feeding birds.

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Some of the turkey's feathers are iridescent, shimmering with color when they reflect light.

Beak to Tail

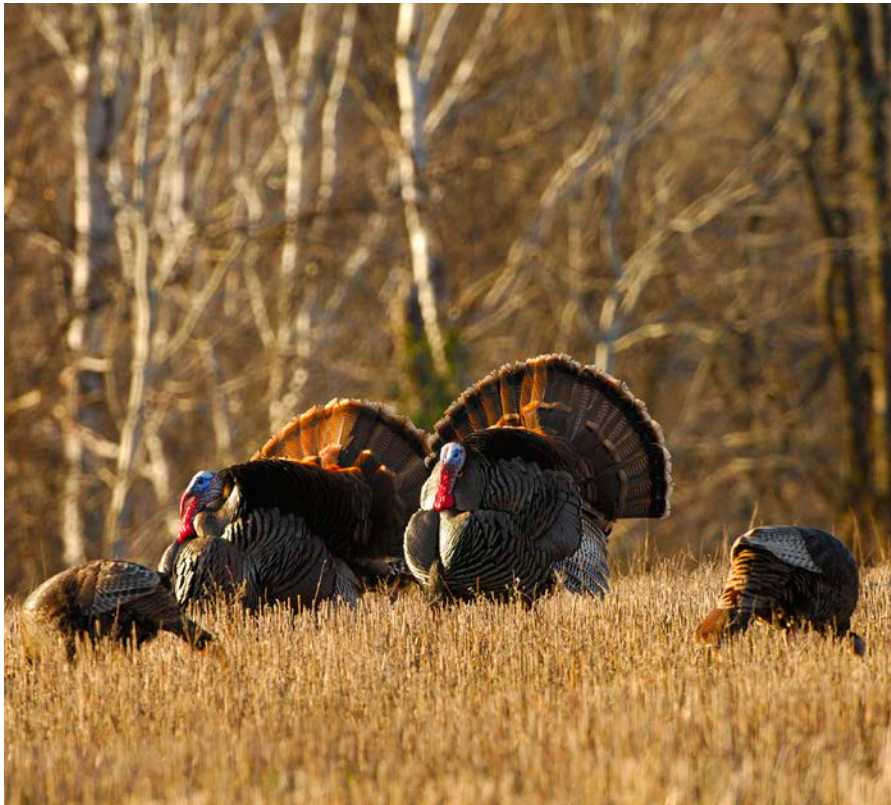
From a distance, wild turkeys appear plain brown. That's a useful form of *camouflage*, making it hard for predators to spot them. Look closer, though, and you'll notice that many of a wild turkey's 5,000 or so feathers are striped or spotted. Some are tinged with rusty orange, pinkish-brown, cream, or black. Other feathers are *iridescent*, shimmering with metallic gold, purple, and green when they catch the light. A thin, hairy-looking clump of feathers, called a *beard*, hangs from the chest of all gobblers and some hens, growing longer as the bird ages.

The wild turkey's small head, slender neck, and sturdy legs are the only parts without this beautiful feathery *plumage*.

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The exposed skin is bluish-gray and covered with scales and bumps. A special flap, called the *wattle*, stretches from beak to chest. Birds can't sweat when it's hot, but a turkey can cool itself by moving blood to the wattle. Heat escapes through its bare surface into the surrounding air.

A male turkey has several other unusual features. When he's courting a hen or facing another gobbler, blood rushes into tiny vessels under his skin. A fleshy *snood* on the gobbler's forehead expands and droops over his beak, while his head and neck turn as red as a fire engine. Gobblers also grow spurs on the backs of their legs to battle with other males or, when cornered, to fight off predators.



Wild turkeys often feed in woodland clearings, fields, or wetlands.

Perfect Habitat

A mixture of woodland and open *habitat* provides everything wild turkeys need to eat, nest, grow up, and stay safe through the seasons. Wild turkeys are most common in areas with oaks and other trees that produce large nuts or seeds. Acorns are an excellent source of energy and nutrition. It's a good thing oaks produce so many! Turkeys and other wildlife devour them in fall, putting on layers of fat to stay warm through the winter. Oaks also offer

strong branches. Wild turkeys fly up to perch in these at night, *roosting* high above the reach of coyotes and other predators.

In warmer seasons, turkey flocks feed in woodland clearings, fields, or wetlands. Turkeys use their beaks to pluck berries or pull seeds off grass stems. Their four strong toes—three facing forward and one facing back—and long nails are perfect for digging up plant roots or capturing small animals such as insects, snails, and salamanders.

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The wild turkey is distantly related to the domesticated turkey often served at Thanksgiving.

An American Tradition

For thousands of years, wild turkeys were an important food source for Native people across the heart of North America. Some Native Americans hunted wild turkeys, while others trapped and kept the birds as livestock.

In the early 1500s, Christopher Columbus and other Spanish con-

quistadors found turkeys in villages from Mexico to Guatemala. They took some of these domestic birds to Europe. A century later, European colonists brought turkeys back across the Atlantic as part of their food supply. They also found wild turkeys to hunt in their new home.

Here, Then Gone

When explorers and settlers reached southern Minnesota in the late 1700s and 1800s, there was plenty of good turkey habitat. They found flocks along the Mississippi River where it borders Wisconsin, and west into the Minnesota River valley. But by 1900, wild turkeys were gone from our state. In fact, they were absent from much of the United States.

Where did they go? The simple answer is this: People changed the habitat where wild turkeys lived. When Minnesota was



Turkey tracks in the sand.

opened to settlers in the mid-1800s, they cut down many trees for lumber and firewood. They cleared the landscape to plant crops and build towns. And a growing population of Minnesotans hunted turkeys for the dinner table.

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Wild turkeys from Missouri were brought to Minnesota. This release took place near Nisswa in 2008.

Bringing Back the Turkey

The disappearance of wild turkeys in Minnesota did not go unnoticed.

“Almost as soon as people realized wild turkeys were gone, efforts began to return them,” says James Burnham, a biologist who used to work at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, or DNR, and now works for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He knows a lot about this part of Minnesota’s history.

Early efforts didn’t work out well. “They used turkeys that had been raised in pens,” Burnham explains. “Those birds didn’t know how to find food, make

nests, or avoid predators in the wild.”

In 1973—exactly 50 years ago—the DNR tried another approach. They got permission to move wild turkeys from Missouri, where the species had not been completely lost. Why go to all that trouble? Turkeys can spread to new areas as they search for habitat, but it might take decades for them to wander this far north. “They had to be trapped, moved north, and released in Minnesota,” Burnham tells me. Twenty-nine birds made the journey to their new home in Houston County, in Minnesota’s far southeastern corner.

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Wild turkeys now live across much of Minnesota, including the colder, snowier north.

More and More Birds

As the population grew, DNR staff and volunteers began to trap and move wild turkeys to other counties across the species’ historic range.

At the time, most people believed wild turkeys couldn’t survive months of cold and deep snow in Minnesota’s northern half. The team gave it a try anyway, and the birds proved how tough they are. Wild turkeys did just fine in central and northern Minnesota, except in the Lake Superior region, where there aren’t many oak trees. “Wild turkeys actually can survive in the north,” says Tim Lyons, a DNR biologist.

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“But it takes a lot of energy to stay warm in winter, so they need the right foods.”

DNR experts now report an abundant statewide population. “Most of those turkeys are related to those original 29 birds from Missouri,” Burnham says.

Thanks to this successful conservation effort, Minnesota has allowed wild turkey hunting since 1978. To make sure the wild turkey population stays strong into the future, the DNR limits when, where, and how people can hunt them. If you’d like to try turkey hunting, ask an adult to help you learn the rules and apply for a permit.



Wild turkeys in your own backyard? In Minnesota it's not out of the question.

Coming to Your Neighborhood

When I moved to Minnesota in the late 1990s, wild turkeys were an uncommon sight in towns. These days, they visit my suburban yard in every season. I see flocks gathered in parks, crossing city streets, and strutting through the busiest city neighborhoods.

But how, and why, did these wild birds

wind up living among us?

The answer is surprisingly simple. Wild turkeys walk far and wide in search of mates, food, and safe roosting trees. As they wander, turkeys may follow streams or rivers that pass through urban areas. The birds stick around wherever they find enough food and shelter.

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Tom turkeys can get aggressive in spring and summer and will sometimes fight each other.

Don't Mess With Me

It's been about six months since my walk in Minneapolis. Spring has arrived, and most of the snow has melted away. I'm filling bird feeders when I hear an unmistakable sound: gobbling. It takes me a moment to pinpoint the source. A male turkey is courting a group of hens in a parking lot at the end of my street.

He looks huge, even from a block away. The gobbler fluffs his feathers, tucks his head back against them, and crosses the pavement toward a group of hens feeding on the grass nearby. Moving closer, he raises his tail feathers, then snaps them open to form a rounded fan. Now for the big finale. Dropping his wings to the ground, the gobbler leans forward and earns his nickname. His voice carries

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through the whole neighborhood: *Gobble gobblegobblegobble!*

I once watched two gobblers fight. It was a good reminder that these truly are wild animals. The males rushed at each other, jumping into the air with a hard flap of their broad wings. One turkey kicked the other with its long feet and spurs. The second bird struggled to stay in the game but soon scooted away.

In spring and summer, gobblers can become dangerous even to humans. Never feed wild turkeys, and ask an adult to chase the birds away if they come close. In their own flocks, wild turkeys establish a *peck order*. A few birds are in charge, and the others follow. To prevent problems, urban turkeys need to see people as the "top birds."



TOP: BILL MARCHEL. BOTTOM: ALLEN BLAKE SHELDON.

Wild turkey hens lay about 10 eggs. Chicks, called poults, hatch in about 28 days.

Little Ones

After mating in spring, wild turkey hens go off on their own. They don't spend much time making a fancy nest—a little pile of leaves hidden beneath taller plants does the trick. Each hen lays about 10 eggs, which she *incubates* for 28 days.

Have you ever seen newly hatched ducks or chickens? They break out of

the shell and can walk in just hours. The same is true of wild turkey chicks, called *poults*. Within a day of hatching, the hen leads her little *brood* away from the nest. At first, turkey poults eat only insects. As the weeks pass, they begin to add the mix of plant foods that make up most of their adult diet.



Wild turkey poults follow a hen as they search for food. Hens are constantly on alert for danger.

Watching the Neighbors

One afternoon in early summer, I spot movement outside the kitchen window. The front yard is swarming with at least 20 turkey poults. The local hens have gathered their broods into a larger flock for safety. The youngsters' bare heads bob back and forth as they search for food in the flowerbeds. When I step outside, the hens herd their poults into a tight group and move away.

Later that week, the flock appears again. This time they're on the hill behind our house. The flock has spread out, and they're walking in a straight line like soldiers. The hens are constantly on alert, using their

keen vision and hearing to watch for danger. Still, the group is smaller than it was. Some of the little ones may have been caught by raccoons, skunks, owls, or eagles.

By autumn, the family begins to separate. Young hens stay close to their mothers through winter, while the males wander off to practice their strutting, gobbling, and other life skills.

I know I'll catch sight of them now and then in winter, or find their arrow-shaped footprints in the snow. Maybe you'll spot some, too, and take a moment to admire these magnificent wild neighbors. 🍃

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