



**GILPIN COUNTY**  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

## **WILDLIFE: MERRIAM'S TURKEYS**

Wild turkeys can be found in the eastern portion of Gilpin County. They prefer ponderosa pine and open spaces for their habitat. The following is information and photos found in an article from Ranger Rick, published in Nov 2014, about wild turkeys. Don't miss the activity you can use to decorate your holiday table!

### **Wild Turkeys**

*It's time for turkey—roasted golden brown and served with cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie!*





A wild turkey flaps its way to safety—at a speed of up to 55 miles per hour!

Thanksgiving is coming soon. That means it's time for turkey—roasted golden brown and served with cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie!

Farm-raised turkeys (the kind most of us eat for Thanksgiving dinner) have been around for hundreds of years. But there's another kind of turkey that goes much further back in time. It's the *wild turkey*—the ancestor of the turkeys that turn up on our dining-room tables. Here are some fascinating facts about these big, all-American birds.

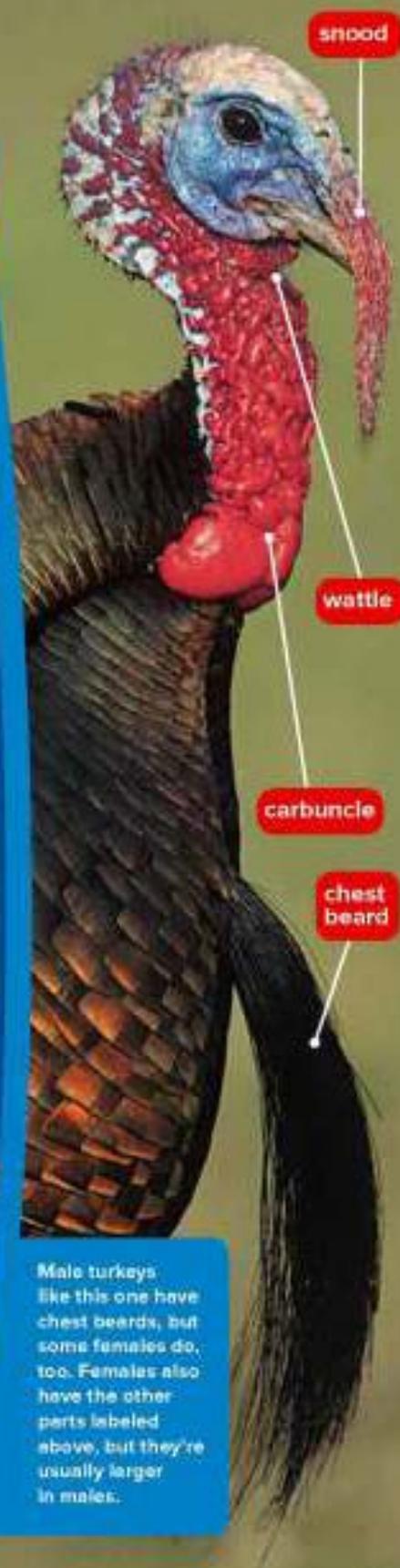
### VANISHING ACT

Wild turkeys have lived in North America for at least five million years. And all was well until settlers from Europe arrived. The settlers spread across the land, cutting down forests and wiping out the turkeys' best habitat. The settlers also killed many turkeys for food. By the early 1900s, wild turkeys existed only in a few out-of-the-way places.

### BIG COMEBACK

Years passed. As some forests began to grow back, a few people wondered: Could we catch some of the last wild turkeys and move them into the growing forests? And if so, would the turkeys make a comeback? The answer to both questions turned out to be "yes"! Today, there are more wild turkeys than ever before!

Even with help, not every animal could have made such a quick comeback. But wild turkeys are smart. And their speedy legs help them flee from predators. When they have to, wild turkeys can even fly quickly (but not very far) to safety.



snood

wattle

carbuncle

chest beard

Wanna race? A flock of turkeys zips along at the pace of the fastest human sprinter.



Male turkeys like this one have chest beards, but some females do, too. Females also have the other parts labeled above, but they're usually larger in males.

DONALD M. JONES (SMALLER) PICTURES © 2018 THE MIRROR SOURCE; ART © STEVE CLIFF (BETTER SOURCE); DONALD M. JONES (BIRD)

The turkeys we eat on our Thanksgiving table are usually “farm raised.” This means although they are the same species, they have been bred and raised on farms.

## **Turkeys in Colorado**

The turkey species that is found in Colorado is the Merriam’s turkey. It is the largest of the 5 turkey species of North America. This turkey ranges between 14- 22 pounds, about the size of your Thanksgiving turkey! Merriam’s turkey is normally found in ponderosa pine forests but in the summer, it might also be found in open areas and meadows.

The Merriam’s turkey eats a wide variety of nuts, seeds, fruits, tubers, flower heads, green leaves, and insects. Fruits and berries in the turkey’s diet vary from year to year depending on their availability. Cultivated grain, such as oats, [barley](#), and wheat, are eaten when available, especially during winter.

## **Population History**

For five million years or more, turkeys have been native in the forests and woodlands of North America. When settlers came, mostly along the Eastern Seaboard, they built towns and cut down trees, they also ate a lot of turkeys. The result was a loss of habitat. By the early 1900s, wild turkeys existed only in a few out-of-the-way places.

As forests grew back, turkey populations recovered. There were some introduction efforts like those around Mount Ranier in Oregon, but native turkey populations also grew and moved to new habitats. Today, there are more wild turkeys than ever before! Even with help, not every animal could have made such a quick comeback. But wild turkeys are smart. And their speedy legs help them flee from predators. When they have to, wild turkeys can even fly quickly (but not very far) to safety.

## **Behavior in the Spring**

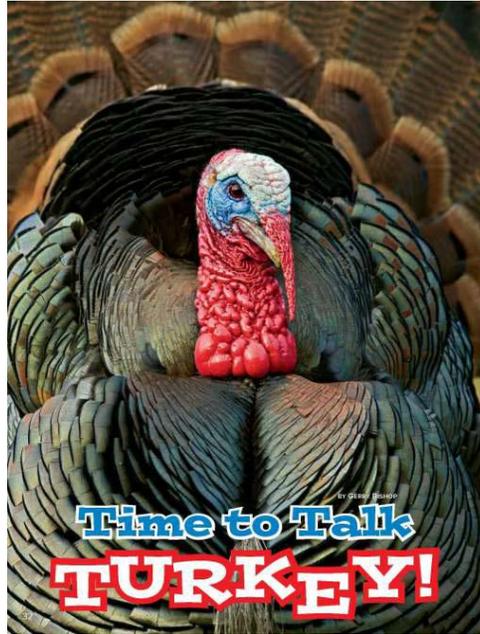
Toms are male turkeys. Spring is mating season, and they’re trying to prove who’s the biggest, baddest, and best turkey in the flock. The skin on their heads and necks turns bright red, white, and blue. They fluff out their feathers, spread their tails as peacocks do, and drag their wing tips on the ground. Two rival males may approach each other and bump their chests together. And if one doesn’t back down, it’s neck-wrestling time. The “top tom” gets to mate with the most hens.

## **Turkey Habitat**

Wild turkeys can be found in every state except Alaska. In the subdivisions of Coal Creek Canyon, they are found strutting across and down the street. My yard has had over 60 turkeys, adults and poults striding through.

## Domestic Turkeys

Farm-raised turkeys are bred to be extra-large and fat as a result, they can't walk very well, or fly at all.



# TURKEY ACTIVITIES

## PINECONE TURKEYS

### MATERIALS:

- pinecone
- autumn leaves or leaves cut from construction paper in autumn colors
- googly eyes
- yellow & red felt or construction paper
- popsicle stick
- tacky glue
- hot glue (optional)

### PROCEDURE:

1. Use hot glue to fix the leaves to the large end of the pinecone, stuck in the cone to resemble tail feathers.
2. Make a head for the turkey on the end of a popsicle stick with googly eyes, and yellow/red paper or felt to create a red snood and beak.
3. Use as a centerpiece at your holiday table!

