



Management of Wild Turkeys in Utah

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Introduction

Today, the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is found year round throughout North America from Canada to Mexico. It is hard to imagine that by the turn of the 20th century the wild turkey was extirpated from most of its historic distribution in North America because of overhunting and habitat loss. Management efforts led by state agencies and private conservation organizations have now restored wild turkey populations throughout much of North America, including Utah the west.

Identifying Wild Turkeys in Utah

Wild turkeys are one of the largest of the game birds, with Utah wild turkeys ranging in weight from 10.5 pounds (small female) to 21 pounds (large male). Adult males are called “toms” or gobblers, 1-year-old males are called “jakes,” adult females are called hens, and 1-year-old females are called “jennies.” The two sub-species of turkeys that inhabit Utah are the Rio Grande turkey



Adult tom turkeys in breeding condition.

(*M. g. intermedia*) and Merriam’s turkey (*M. g. merriami*). Visually, one can tell a Rio from a Merriam by the buff or tan feather tips of the Rio, compared to the white feather tips of the Merriam’s turkey. Both of these species have long legs, wide rounded tails and small heads with a slim neck (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Physical characteristics of Rio Grande and Merriam’s wild turkeys

The bare skin on the male's neck is very noticeable on this bird. During the breeding season, in the spring, breeding males' necks turn a bright red. Otherwise, this skin is a grayish blue. During courtship, male turkeys strut and fan their tails and produce the recognizable "gobble," which can be heard up to a mile away. The beard, located on the chest of male turkeys is also a good feature to look for when determining sex. The beards on the males are black fibrous hairs that hang down from the chest area and can be long enough to touch the ground.

The females, on the other hand are mostly dark brown, lighter in coloration on the bare neck region and express a shorter bill than the males.

Wild Turkey Habitats

Typical wild turkey habitat consists of open woodland but the types of woodland will vary depending on the region. Turkeys prefer habitats that create "mast-producing" fruit such as acorns and other nuts. For example, turkeys found in the Southwestern region of the United States are

generally found in open grassy savannahs with small oak trees. In Utah, wild turkeys inhabit ponderosa pine forests, oak tree forests, cottonwood tree bottoms and pinyon/juniper habitats. Merriam's turkeys are considered mountain birds, spending their summers in ponderosa forests and up into spruce and fir forests (7,000 – 11,000 ft. in elevation). Rio Grande turkeys, on the other hand, are associated with cottonwood river bottoms of lower elevations. These habitats are usually located within the mountainous regions throughout Utah.



Utah Division of Wildlife Resources biologists shown releasing translocated wild turkeys.

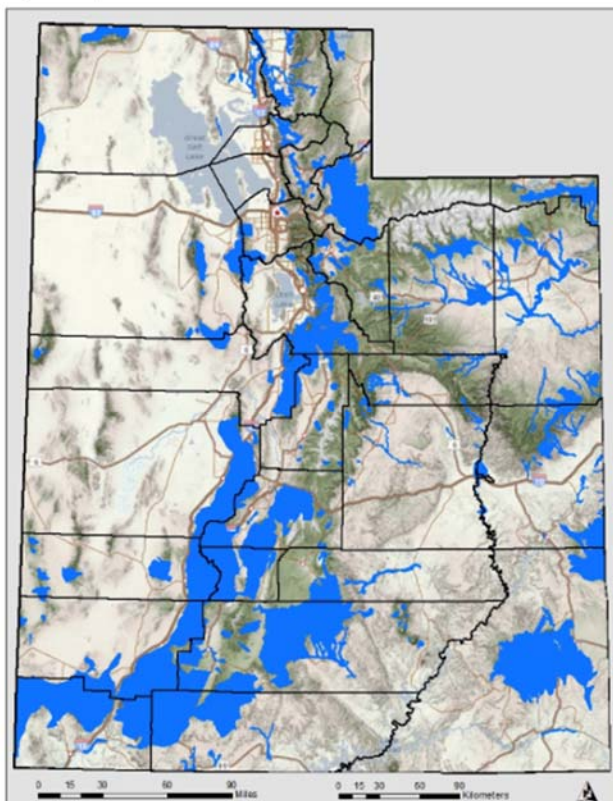


Figure 2. Occupied Wild Turkey Habitat Map, Utah, 2014. Shaded area (blue) represents occupied turkey habitat.

Re-establishing Turkeys in Utah

Largely because of overhunting and habitat loss, the population of wild turkeys in North America was estimated to be only 1,900 wild individuals in the 1930s. Many states no longer reported wild turkey populations. When European settlers arrived in Utah, the turkey species had already been hunted out of the area; however, historical records indicate that Native Americans had turkeys in their environment (and probably hunted them). The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) has the sole responsibility of managing wild turkeys, considered upland game, in Utah. As early as the 1920s, the UDWR began to attempt to re-establish turkeys in Utah. Until the 1950s, transplants of turkeys back into Utah were not successful. Finally, a transplant of Merriam's turkeys from Colorado to Grand County, Utah, in 1952 was successful - they established and grew in number. Subsequent relocations of Merriam's wild turkeys, from this Utah population, to Grand,

Garfield, Kane, Iron and Washington counties were also successful, creating turkey populations that have spread into several parts of Utah. In 1989, Utah began translocating Rio Grande turkeys into Washington County, using birds from Arizona, Colorado and several other states. These translocations have established turkey populations among the lower elevation habitat in southern Utah.

Current Status of Wild Turkeys in Utah

The hard work put into restoring the wild turkey habitats and the continued public support for wild turkey management has allowed us to enjoy the presence of this bird either at our table or for the quick view of a flock running across the road. The UDWR estimates that there are 18,000 - 25,000 wild turkeys occupying 127 million acres of habitat in Utah. Each spring locals and visitors are often pleasantly surprised to see male turkeys strutting for the females in a small field or on a dirt road.

As of 2013, residents of Utah can enjoy two hunting seasons for wild turkey. In April, there is a limited entry and youth hunting season. After the limited entry hunt, there is a general (over the counter) hunt. In 2013, Utah provided 9733 wild turkey tags to hunters.



Tom turkeys strutting in southern Utah. Photo courtesy UDWR.

Issues and Concerns with Wild Turkeys in Utah

The successful wild turkey reintroduction program conducted by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has resulted in locally large populations in some locations, particularly in southern Utah.

Because of concentrated turkey populations in several areas of Utah, conflicts with turkeys in agricultural areas as well as along the urban-wildlife interface can occur. Correlated to this issue, biologists are concerned that with increasing populations of turkeys in Utah, and expanding populations of people, winter habitat may become limiting. This concentrates localized populations of turkeys into a few agricultural fields and along the urban-wildlife interface, increasing the incidences of nuisance problems.

Managing Wild Turkey Damage

Agricultural producers have experienced crop damage from wild turkeys in many parts of the United States. However, the extent of the damage is difficult to accurately assess. Several studies have determined that, because of the size of wild turkeys, they are often mistakenly blamed for crop damage that has occurred because of other wildlife species such as deer and raccoons. In two different surveys conducted nationwide (unfortunately prior to large populations of turkeys in Utah), turkeys were implicated in damage to corn crops (all seasons), hay, and silage. The majority of incidents (93%) reported light damage to crops. In Utah, the UDWR recognizes the potential for crop damage by turkeys. One way they coordinate to mediate the problem is by providing special hunt permits in problem areas to manage the numbers of turkeys in these localized populations.

Crop damage is only one complaint regarding turkeys; roosting in large flocks can also cause concern. Their droppings can cause a health issue if allowed to accumulate. Additionally, their large size can damage cars, windows, doors, and other personal items when turkeys choose them as roosting locations, or try to battle their reflection during the mating season. Furthermore, during spring and summer (mating and nesting) turkeys can become aggressive, presenting real physical danger to humans and pets in their vicinity.

Identifying turkeys as the culprit can be tricky. In crops, look for tracks of three long toes facing forward; sometimes the track will have a fourth toe facing directly backward. Lethal control of problem turkeys can only be conducted by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. However, regulated hunting

is an effective management tool used by the agency to manage the growth of turkey populations throughout Utah. Non-lethal damage management can be conducted in several ways - harassment, exclusion, and habitat modification are the most effective.

Harassment – Scaring turkeys away from homes and urban areas can be an effective method to reduce damage. Placing new objects in the area that turkeys use, can spook them and keep them away. Additionally, wands with tinsel (e.g., Mylar) in the problem area can also be effective.

Exclusion – If turkey roosting is a problem, “spikes” that are commonly used to prohibit pigeons from roosting on buildings can also be used along window sills and fences. Fences erected around small gardens or other small habitat patches will exclude turkeys from that area. However, if the area is large, turkeys will simply fly over the fence.

Habitat Modification – This method involves removing the habitat and food resources from the area that are attracting turkeys. For example, a short cut lawn or a xeriscape reduces the number of invertebrates found in a yard, which will discourage wild turkey’s using the area to find food. Removing tree snags or brush piles may remove their roosting areas.

Wild turkeys are a grand bird, often considered the pinnacle of upland game hunting. Through targeted habitat management and population management, we again have a thriving population of wild turkeys in Utah. In areas with a large population of turkeys, conflicts may occur in local areas. Proper management can create a balanced population of turkeys throughout Utah.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Kenneth L. White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.