



Big Game

By Steven E. Rauch

The sun was beginning to lighten the eastern horizon when the morning's first gobble thundered from the ridge above. A hunter set up about 100 yards from the old Tom. After a few seductive calls, the gobbler flew down from his roost tree. Anticipating the direction the gobbler might come from, the hunter shifted his position and shouldered the shotgun. The hunter's heart was pounding when the strutting "long beard" appeared just 25 yards away. The gobbler just needed to move from behind the tree trunk and then...

Similar scenes are repeated each year during the spring gobbler season in West Virginia; but this has not always been the case. Sound management practices and laws developed and enforced by Division of Natural Resources personnel, combined with hard work by hunters and conservation organizations over the past 75 plus years have contributed to getting the turkey population to where it is today.

Wild turkeys were abundant in the mid-1700s when the European settlers arrived. Although the settlers logged the forests, the abundance of wild turkeys continued until the advent of the steam engine making large-scale logging operations possible. The use of railroads increased access to forested land, making timber removal easier and faster. In addition,

uncontrolled fires often followed logging activities. This combination spelled disaster for the wild turkey. The period between 1902 and 1925, the peak of logging activity in West Virginia, witnessed the lowest wild turkey populations. The wild turkey had become rare except in the most inaccessible mountain regions of West Virginia. Today, due to restoration efforts, the wild turkey once again lives throughout West Virginia, with all 55 counties reporting a spring gobbler harvest annually.

Restoration of the wild turkey in West Virginia has been the result of a combination of several factors, including the acquisition of state and federally owned lands, wildlife management practices, hunting regulations, maturing forests following wide-scale logging and public cooperation. Wildlife Resources Section (WRS) biologists have conducted turkey research for 50 years. The knowledge gained from these projects has helped them wisely manage this valuable resource. The first steps in wild turkey management began in 1903 with regulations that outlawed market hunting, baiting and trapping. Early efforts with restocking wild turkeys used pen-reared birds and were a complete failure. These turkeys lacked the ability to survive in the wild. With the development of cannon and rocket-launched nets, wild turkeys could be

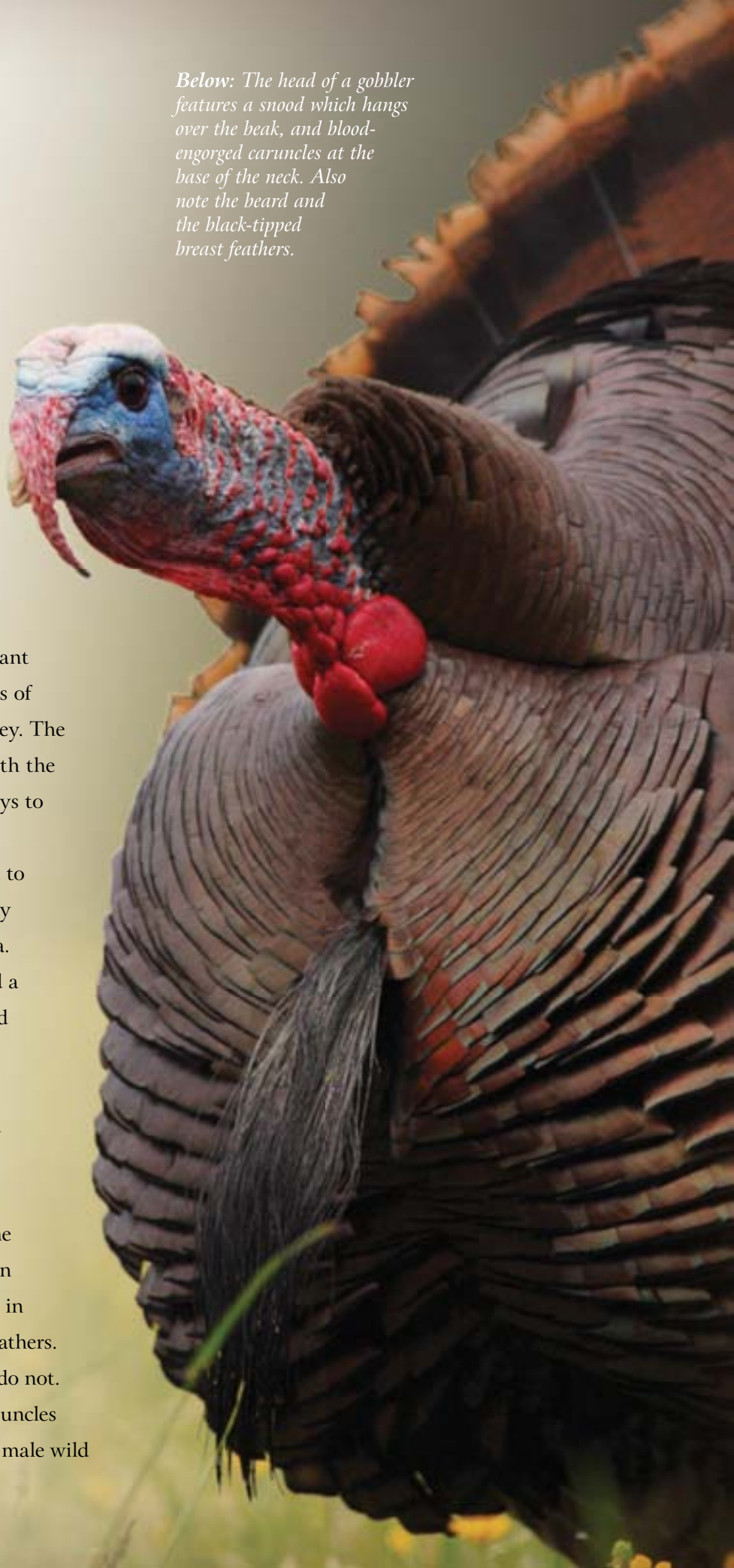
Bird

Photography by Thomas Kirkland

captured in areas with an abundant population and relocated into suitable habitat in other regions of the state. State and federally owned lands were very important for this period of restoration, providing areas of suitable habitat to re-establish the wild turkey. The trap-and-relocate program ended in 1989 with the successful moving of more than 2,200 turkeys to 32 counties across West Virginia.

Five sub-species of wild turkey are native to the North American continent. Of those, only the eastern wild turkey lives in West Virginia. The adult male wild turkey is typically called a tom or gobbler, and the juvenile male is called a jake. The female is called a hen. Several characteristics distinguish between the sexes. Toms are much larger than hens, and a beard hangs from the breast of male wild turkeys. Although hens can have a beard, it is usually shorter and thinner. The breast feathers of the male wild turkey are black tipped and have an iridescent appearance, while the hen is duller in appearance with tan- or buff-tipped breast feathers. Male wild turkeys have spurs, while females do not. Additionally, males have fleshy wattles or caruncles while hens do not. The head and neck of the male wild

Below: The head of a gobbler features a snood which hangs over the beak, and blood-engorged caruncles at the base of the neck. Also note the beard and the black-tipped breast feathers.





A wary hen keeps a lookout while her poult feeds in a field.

turkey is primarily featherless, and during the spring will be colored red, white and blue. The hen's head is usually drab in color and will have feathers up the back of the neck onto the top of the head.

Two sexual characteristics discovered by WRS biologists decades ago, especially important to hunters, are the differences in foot size and shape of the droppings. The distance from the tip of the middle toe to the back of the heel is approximately four inches or longer in the male, while the female's is approximately four inches or less in length. The droppings of hens are usually curled and those of male wild turkeys are usually straight or J-shaped

Biologists distinguish the age of adult and juvenile (jake) male wild turkeys primarily by observing the tail feathers and the outermost wing feathers. The central tail feathers of a juvenile are longer than the outer tail

feathers when the tail is fanned out. The adult's tail feathers are even or uniform in length when fanned out. The one to two outermost wing, or flight, feathers of the juvenile male are pointed and black towards the tips. The adults' flight feathers are rounded and the white bars extend to the feather's tips.

Wild turkeys are social birds, especially within the sexes. Hens flock together almost year around but will disband to prepare for breeding and nesting. In the fall, the young male birds tend to remain with the hen flocks until they separate to form their own flocks. Adult male wild turkeys form exclusive flocks and discourage younger males from joining them. Adult male wild turkeys don't associate with females except during the breeding season.

The diet of wild turkeys consists of a wide array of food items, which varies throughout the year. Turkeys eat numerous types of grass and forb leaves and seeds. They also consume many types of wild fruits and berries, including

blackberry, dogwood, grape and cherry. During the warm months of the year, insects are important food items. This is especially true for the development of the poults, or young wild turkeys, during the summer. In the fall and winter, acorns and beechnuts are very important food sources.

Wild turkeys breed in the spring. In West Virginia, the second peak of gobbling and the peak of incubation usually occurs during the fourth week of April, which is why the spring gobbler season opens on the fourth Monday of April. Gobblers establish breeding grounds and begin elaborate courtship displays to attract females. After the female has been bred, she locates a suitable nesting area to lay her eggs. Nests are commonly located under trees, in brushy patches, beside woodland roads, under treetops left after logging, or in abandoned fields.

The hen lays a clutch of about 10 to 12 eggs over a period of approximately two weeks, with most hens laying one egg per day. Incubation lasts approximately 28 days. Disturbance of the hen during incubation may cause the hen to abandon the nest, so it is very important to quickly leave the area when a hen is flushed off her nest. All the eggs hatch at the same time. The wild turkey hatchlings are precocious and the poults are ready to leave the nest in a short period of time, usually about two days. This occurs in late May through June in West Virginia.

The first 30 days for the wild turkey poults are the most important for survival, with the first 10 to 14 days being the most critical time. Predators and poor weather, especially cold and wet conditions, can take a toll on the young birds during this period. The poults begin to fly well enough to escape predators when they are two to three weeks old. The poults will spend the next couple months feeding on insects in fields, pastures, road edges or similar habitat where

A slate call is used by hunters to mimic several different calls of the gobbler, including the yelp, cluck, purr and kee-kee run.

the vegetation is tall enough to provide overhead cover, but not too thick to restrict movement. Insects provide protein essential for growth.

Wild turkeys are hunted in both the spring and fall in West Virginia. Regulated hunting is an important component of a sound turkey management program. Typically in the spring, a hunter will imitate the various calls of a hen and attempt to bring the male into range for a clean kill. Several types of calls are available, including mouth, box, slate, glass and push button to name a few. Even the wing bone of a wild turkey can be made into a very good call. Camouflage is important to conceal oneself when hunting, because the wild turkey has very good eyesight. Hunters should exercise extreme care when choosing a set-up location, however. For safety reasons the set-up location should be in open woods or the edge of a field, not in heavy brush. It is best to sit against a large tree or stump. Never, under any circumstance, shoot at a target that is not plainly visible. Remember that during the spring gobbler season only bearded birds are legal, so if you can't plainly see the turkey you can't determine whether it is bearded or not.

A common fall turkey hunting technique entails locating a flock and then deliberately scattering the flock. Some hunters use a well-trained dog for this. Then the hunter sets up where the flock scattered from and calls the flock back together by imitating the Kee Kee run call of a lost poult. One of the most challenging fall turkey hunts is to scatter adult gobblers and then call one back into shooting range.

The next time you're hunting or hiking, or just driving down the road and see a wild turkey flock, take the opportunity to reflect on the restoration success of West Virginia's big game bird.

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