

ON THE WILD SIDE

An American treasure in your own neighborhood

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One lovely evening in the spring, we were walking down Leonard St. near an open field. We heard something unusual in the bordering forest and decided to explore. Not far into the woods, we came across an amazing site: two male turkeys were strutting around with their feathers all puffed up and their tail feathers fanned out just as in Thanksgiving pictures you see this time of year. Around them, and clearly enjoying the show, were about 10-12 hens. The males (toms) were making gobbling sounds and dancing merrily. We felt like we were witnessing a secret ritual and that we had been dropped into another place and time.

When our sons were little and growing up in Norton in the 1970's and 80's, they never saw wild turkeys. We only began seeing them a few years ago. A flock visited our yard a few times and scratched around for seed fallen from the bird feeders before wandering away.

I researched the return of turkeys to Massachusetts and found the MassWildlife website most informative: http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/wildlife/facts/birds/turkey/turkey_faqs.htm

The first and most startling fact I found was that wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) have been gone from Massachusetts for about a century and a half! When the Europeans first settled here, turkeys were abundant. As they cleared the hardwood forests and cultivated the land, habitat for turkeys diminished. Settlers also used turkey for food, of course, as we do with their domesticated descendants.

Many sources report that the last native wild turkey in MA was killed in 1851. Long before colonial times, Native Americans lived in harmony with wild turkeys for thousands of years. They valued turkeys more for their feathers and as spiritual symbols. They also used them for food if other meat was scarce. It is easy to see why the feathers were appreciated - we found one recently and it is a substantial but delicate work of natural art and design.

By the 1930's numbers of turkeys nationwide were at a low point. As wildlife management grew as a science and after new protection laws were passed, several states began in earnest to bring back the turkey. Releases of pen-raised birds failed because the birds did not have survival skills needed in the wild. Eventually new capture techniques were developed so



PHOTO BY CHARLENE T. McNEIL
This tom is displaying his tail feathers and fluffing up his chest feathers, a behavior that attracts females and intimidates other males.

wild turkeys could be relocated. In 1972-73, MassWildlife released 37 wild turkeys in the Berkshires. The population grew and some of them were taken to other parts of the state. Focusing on Bristol County, the website shows that 24 turkeys were released in Fall River in 1988, 23 in Dartmouth in 1993 and another 20 in Rehoboth in 1996. Currently, our population in Massachusetts is believed to be stabilizing around 20,000. And once again, all 48 contiguous states have wild turkey populations.

So much for numbers, now let's look at some features and behaviors of turkeys. Everyone knows, they are large birds, toms can weigh over 20 lbs and hens up to about 12 lbs. They are active during the day and roost in trees to avoid predators at night. They breed in the spring, March to May, performing the ritual strut we were lucky enough to witness. It is interesting that even though there is a strict pecking order, more than one male might strut at a time even though only the dominant male will mate with the hens. The helper male displays and adds to the general excitement of the event but his role is simply to help his close male relative reproduce successfully.

Each hen can lay up to a dozen eggs and the poults (not "chicks") emerge 28 days later. Poults are well developed compared to many other bird species. Their eyes are open and they have warm downy feathers. The first 24-hours are crucial to their survival because they become "imprinted" on the hen. Imprinting is a fast form of learning and social development. About one day after hatching the hen leads her brood out to search for insects, berries and seeds. The poults have already learned to understand and respond to her calls. If the poult is raised in a pen, it will miss out on this important stage of learning and not survive if released to the wild.

Poults learn to fly when they are about 8-10 days old. Then they can roost at night which helps to protect them from predators like snakes, crows raccoons and skunks. Adult turkeys also have a variety of predators including red fox, coyote, fisher, owls and hawks. Adult turkeys usually feed on plant foods like nuts and berries. They also eat roots, leaves, flowers, fruits and seeds. They do not need supplements from people; if we provide forests and grasslands they do well on their own.

As I think about Thanksgiving and enjoy the spirit and traditional tastes of this unique American holiday, I can't help but think about the wild turkey and all it has meant to the history of New England and the United States. As the MassWildlife website says: "The wild turkey is part of the American heritage and an essential component of our native fauna, ...to be treasured by us and our children now and for the future."

You can help to preserve and support Norton's wild turkeys and other wildlife by certifying your yard with the National Wildlife Federation. We hope to have 100 more homes certified as wildlife habitats in Norton. When Norton has its 300th birthday, we hope to be a **Community Wildlife Habitat**.

For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website:

<http://www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx>

For local information, see the Land Preservation Society of Norton website:

<http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org/>

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