Florida Wild Turkey

(Meleagris gallopavo osceola)

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by Mary C. Kennamer

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PHOTO BY LOVETT E. WILLIAMS JR.

More iridescent red and green is seen in the Florida species.

The Florida wild turkey, also referred to as the Osceola, is found only on the peninsula of Florida. This particular subspecies was first described in 1890 by W.E.D. Scott who named it for the famous Seminole Chief, Osceola, who led his tribe against the Americans in a 20-year war beginning in 1835.

It's similar to the eastern wild turkey but is smaller and darker in color with less white veining in the wing quills. The white bars in these feathers are narrow, irregular, and broken and do not extend all the way to the feather shaft. The black bars predominate the feather. Secondary wing feathers are also dark, and when the wings are folded on the back, there are no whitish triangular patches as seen on the eastern.

Feathers of the Florida turkey show more iridescent green and red colors, with less bronze than the eastern. The dark color of the tail coverts and the large tail feathers tipped in brown is similar to the eastern, but unlike the lighter colors of the three western subspecies. Its colorations and behavior are ideal for the flat pine woods, oak and palmetto hammocks, and swamp habitats of Florida. Adult females, or hens, are similar to the males but duller and lighter colored throughout, except wing feathers, which are darker.

The reproductive cycle for the Florida wild turkey begins only slightly earlier than for the eastern wild turkey in other southern states. However, in southern Florida, turkeys gobble during warm spells in January, several weeks before actual mating. Egg laying is mainly in April with the cycle complete with peak hatching occurring in May.

Breeding behavior is triggered primarily by the increasing day length in spring, but unusually warm or cold spells may accelerate or slow breeding activity. This behavior begins while birds may still be in large winter flocks prior to separating as individuals or into small groups.

The basic social organization of these flocks is determined by a pecking order with the most dominate bird at the top and the least on the bottom. Males and females have separate hierarchies and there can be pecking orders within and between flocks of the same sex; while stable pecking orders within flocks of the same sex seem to be common to all wild turkey subspecies. Turkeys have home ranges, not territories where individuals defend space within a given habitat from other members of the same sex. Instead they fight for dominance recognizing individuals within the pecking order while sharing overlapping home ranges.

Courtship behavior patterns include gobbling and strutting by the males. Gobbling attracts hens to males who court the hens by strutting. If the hen selects the gobbler for mating she crouches, which signals the male to copulate. The first peak of gobbling activity is associated with the begin-

Florida is the only state with a native population of the Florida wild turkey, sometimes also referred to as the Osceola.

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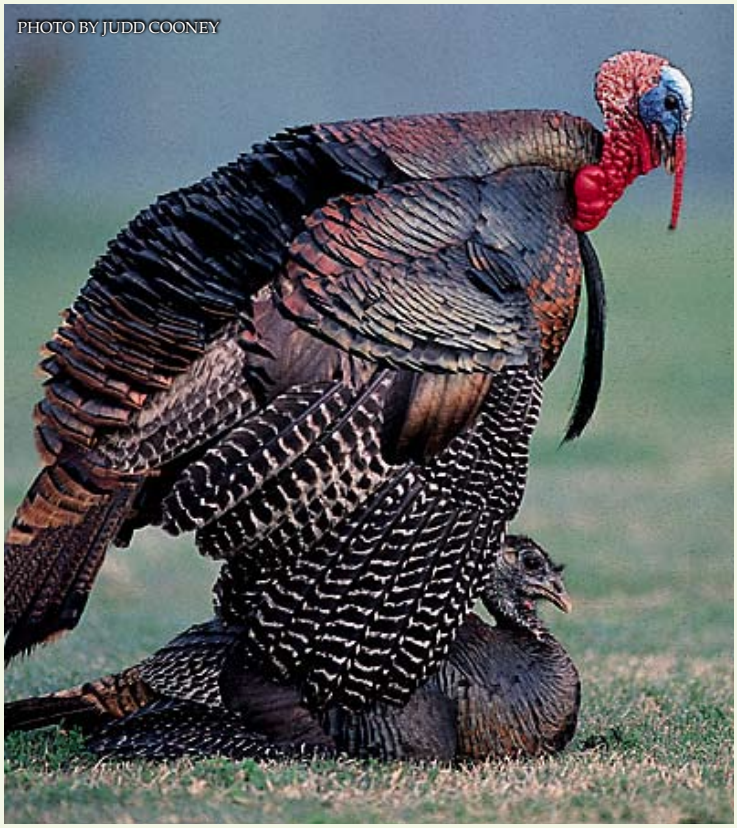

Gobbling attracts hens to males who court the hens by strutting. If the hen selects the gobbler for mating she crouches, which signals the male to copulate.

ning of the breeding period when gobblers are searching for hens. The second peak occurs a few weeks later, when most hens begin incubation.

Hens become secretive while searching for a site to nest prior to laying eggs. Laying hens may continue to feed with other hens and mate with gobblers, but this social activity will be away from the nest site.

Nests are shallow depressions formed mostly by scratching, squatting, and laying eggs rather than by purposeful construction. The arrangement of twigs and leaves is minimal in sites chosen for their moderately dense understory which still allows the hen a view but gives protection from avian predators.

Laying a clutch of 10 - 12 eggs takes about 2 weeks and unincubated eggs are usually covered with leaves. Continuous incubation begins about the time the last egg is laid at which time the hen no longer tries to conceal her eggs when she leaves for short periods to feed.

The hen will incubate for 26 - 28 days sitting quietly and moving about once an hour to turn the eggs. Actual hatching begins with pipping—the poult rotating within the shell, chipping a complete break around the large end of the egg. Hens respond to the pipping sounds by making soft clucks at random, a form of communication which begins to imprint the poults to the hen as she inspects the eggs and turns them. Damp poults clumsily free themselves from the eggs but are fully dry and coordinated so they can follow the hen within 12 to 24 hours after hatching. This vocal communication between hen and poults still in the eggs is an important part of the hatching process and is critical to survival of the young.

Imprinting is a special form of learning which facilitates the rapid social development of the poults into adults. It's a strong social bond between the hen and her offspring which occurs up to 24 hours after hatching. Imprinting describes the rapid process by which the young poults learn to recognize their species, essential for their survival. It happens only at this time and cannot be reversed.

Day-old poults learn to respond to the hen's putt or alarm call before leaving the nest and respond by freezing or running to hide beneath her. The hen, clucking almost continually, slowly leads her poults away from the nest until within a few hours her pace is more normal. By now the poults have formed into a brood group that is constantly feeding by pecking at food items, a behavior learned from their mother.

By the second day out of the nest, wild turkey poults are performing most of the characteristic feeding, movement, and grooming behavior patterns. By the end of the first week they are regularly dusting with the hen. By their second week they are able to fly short distances and at the third week they are able to roost in low trees with the hen. The ability to roost in trees is an important event in the brood's development as it removes them from the danger of ground predators. Roosting occurs at the beginning of another phase of rapid development, the acquisition of juvenile plumage and a change in diet from predominantly insects to a higher percentage of plant matter. This phase of behavioral and physical development is accompanied by a sharp decline in poult mortality. Poults that survive the first six weeks to roost in trees have a much better chance of surviving to adulthood.

At age 14 weeks, male and female poults are distinguishable by body size and plumage. They have formed separate pecking orders although still dominated by the hen until all males have finally left the brood group to form their own loose social units.

Imprinting is a special form of learning between the hen and her young which begins with pipping and ends up to 24 hours after hatching.

By fall, the pecking order of the sibling groups has been established and the young flocks are ready to enter the social organization of the surrounding population. The body growth of juveniles ends by the beginning of winter when the flocks, separated by age and sex class, settle into winter range.

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The Florida wild turkey is similar to the eastern but smaller and darker in color.

The Wild Turkey Records program administered by the National Wild Turkey Federation recognizes any turkey taken south of a line between Taylor and Dixie counties on the Gulf to a line between Nassau and Duval counties on the Atlantic as the Florida subspecies. Any turkey taken in any of the following 24 counties is considered an eastern subspecies: Baker, Bay, Calhoun, Columbia, Escambia, Franklin, Gadsden, Gulf, Hamilton, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Liberty, Lafayette, Madison, Nassau, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Suwanee, Taylor, Wakulla, Walton and Washington.

For additional information on this subject refer to "The Wild Turkey Biology and Management," edited by Jim Dickson. The book is available for $59.95 from the National Wild Turkey Federation, call 1-800-THE-NWTF, or visit www.nwtf.org.

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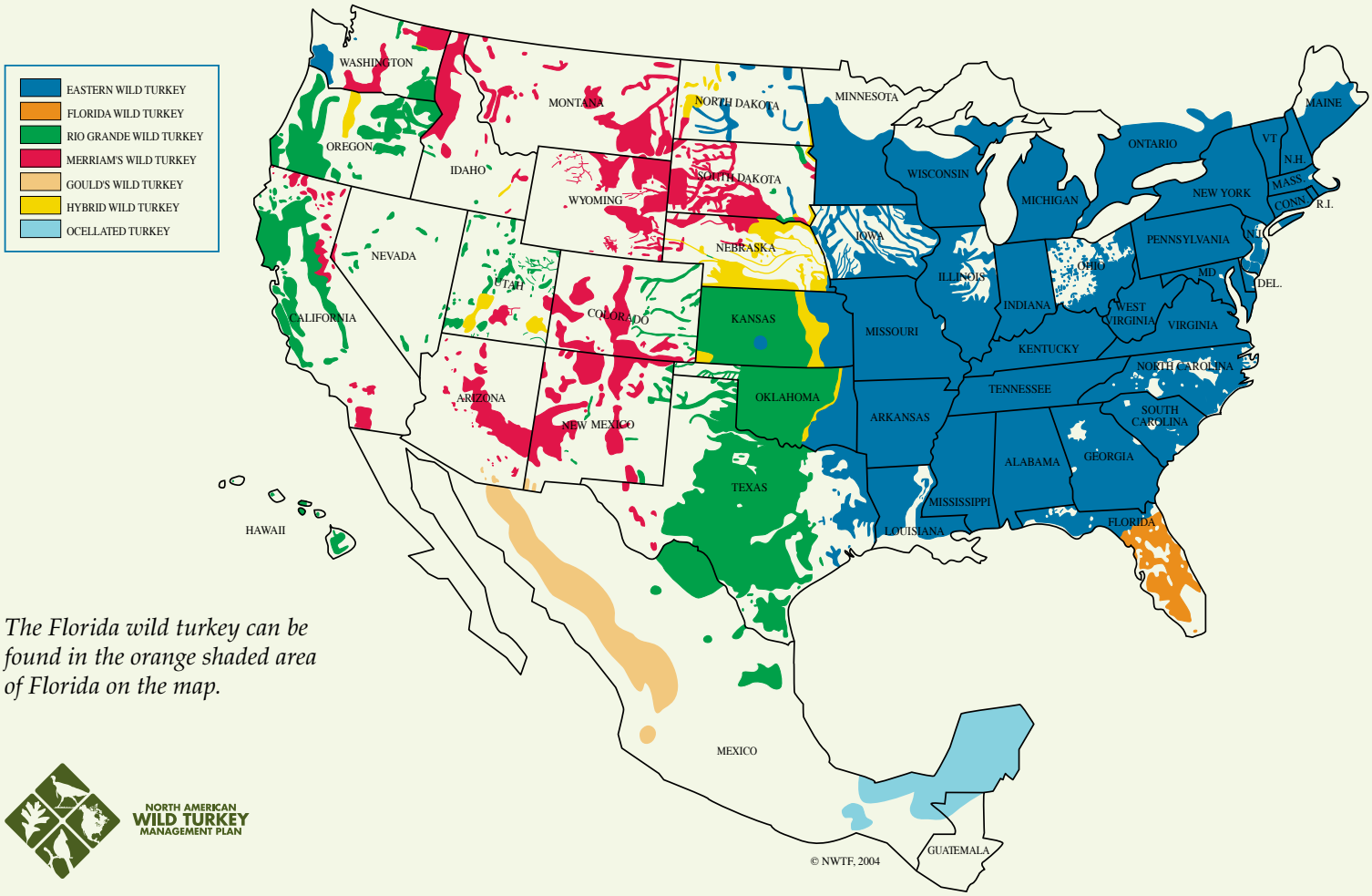

The Florida wild turkey can be found in the orange shaded area of Florida on the map.

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