

# PROFILE OF A SPRING GOBBLER

Spring is the focal point of the wild turkey gobbler's year. The usually cautious and secretive bird is especially active during breeding season. The tom's day begins in the gray light before sunrise, when his booming gobbles echo across the greening woodland. After flying down, he struts and displays for hens, at times gobbling incessantly. Occasionally, he may have to fight off a rival gobbler or escape from a predator that was attracted by his gobbling. The gobbler feeds little during breeding season, relying on a breast sponge—a layer of fat and blood vessels—to supply the energy he needs. The gobbler is a magnificent visual spectacle in the spring. His iridescent feathers are cascades of metallic hues that flash and glisten as he struts and turns in the sunlight. The large, outspread fan of tail feathers is always displayed in the direction of nearby hens while the alternating colors of the gobbler's head betrays his temperament. It is a rare privilege to see a gobbler up close—to feel his thundering gobbles, to share in this fascinating rite of spring.

—BOB SOPCHICK

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• STRUTTING ATTRACTS HENS JUST PRIOR TO AND DURING BREEDING SEASON. STRUTTING GOBBLERS TAKE TWO OR THREE QUICK STEPS, FAN THEIR TAILS AND DRAG THEIR WINGS ON THE GROUND. THE STRUT IS OFTEN ACCOMPANIED BY A LOW-PITCHED SOUND CALLED A "DRUM."

• IN STRUT, YOUNG GOBBLERS (JAKES) CAN BE DISTINGUISHED FROM ADULT TOMS BY THE LONGER MIDDLE FEATHERS OF THE TAIL FAN.

• PRIMARY FEATHER SHOWING WORN TIP

• THE WINGS ARE USED IN FLIGHT, FIGHTING, DEFENSE AGAINST PREDATORS AND SEXUAL DISPLAY. PRIMARY FLIGHT FEATHERS OF MATURE GOBBLERS ARE OFTEN WORN AT THE TIPS FROM DRAGGING ACROSS THE GROUND WHILE STRUTTING.

• ELONGATED SNOOD

• GOBBLING IS INTENDED TO CALL HENS FOR MATING BUT OCCASIONALLY ATTRACTS OTHER GOBBLERS. ON CALM MORNINGS YOU CAN HEAR A GOBBLER MORE THAN A MILE AWAY.

• DURING FIGHTS FOR DOMINANCE, GOBBLERS RAKE EACH OTHER WITH THEIR CLAWS AND SPURS.

• BOTH SEXES ARE BORN WITH A "BUTTON" OF HORNY KERATIN ON THE LOWER LEG

• TRACKS SHOWING A MIDDLE TOE LONGER THAN 4 1/4 INCHES WERE MADE BY AN ADULT GOBBLER.

• THOUGH THE EAR LACKS AN EXTERNAL FLAP TO CONCENTRATE SOUND WAVES, TURKEYS CAN PINPOINT SOUNDS FROM LONG DISTANCES.

• THE WILD TURKEY'S BODY/WING STRUCTURE IS BEST SUITED FOR SHORT, RAPID FLIGHT, BUT TURKEYS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO FLY MORE THAN A MILE, ALTERNATING RAPID WING BEATS WITH GLIDING. THEY'VE BEEN CLOCKED AT 55 MPH.

• WHEN STRUTTING FOR HENS, THE GOBBLER'S SNOOD ELONGATES.

• THE DEWLAP IS PRESENT ON ALL TURKEYS BUT MOST PROMINENT ON ADULT GOBBLERS. IT TAKES ON A DEEP RED IN SPRING.

• LARGE AND BULBOUS, THE GOBBLER'S WATTLES TURN FLAME RED WHEN THE BIRD IS EXCITED OR AGGRESSIVE.

• TURKEYS HAVE ABOUT 6,000 FEATHERS. GENERAL COLOR APPEARANCE RANGES FROM DARK BROWN TO BLACK, BUT INDIVIDUAL FEATHERS CARRY IRIDESCENT HUES OF COPPER, RED, GREEN, BRONZE AND GOLD.

• BREAST FEATHERS OF GOBBLERS ARE TIPPED IN BLACK, WHILE THOSE OF HENS ARE TIPPED IN BUFF.

• ONE-YEAR-OLD JAKES HAVE A SHORT TUFT OF BEARD WHILE THE BEARD OF A TWO-YEAR-OLD GOBBLER IS ABOUT NINE INCHES LONG.

• A GOBBLER'S BEARD IS ACTUALLY A UNIQUE FEATURE OF THE SKIN THAT NEVER MOLTS. IT GROWS THREE TO FIVE INCHES PER YEAR, BUT AFTER TWO YEARS IT BEGINS TO WEAR OFF AT THE END FROM CONTACT WITH THE GROUND. THE LONGEST BEARD EVER RECORDED ON AN EASTERN GOBBLER MEASURED JUST UNDER 17 INCHES.

• POWERFUL LEGS AND FEET ENABLE TURKEYS TO COVER LONG DISTANCES AND PERCH IN TREES FOR SAFETY. TURKEYS CAN RUN AT SPEEDS UP TO 12 MPH. LEGS OF YOUNG BIRDS ARE GRAY OR DARK BROWN, WHILE THOSE OF ADULTS ARE PINK OR REDDISH.

• TWO-YEAR-OLD GOBBLERS HAVE SPURS LESS THAN AN INCH LONG. SPURS ON OLDER GOBBLERS MAY REACH TWO INCHES.

• HENS SCRATCH OUT A SHALLOW DEPRESSION IN THE GROUND TO HOLD THEIR CLUTCH OF EGGS.

• HENS LAY ONE EGG PER DAY, USUALLY 10 TO 12 OVER A PERIOD OF TWO WEEKS.

• POUTS HATCH ABOUT 26 DAYS AFTER THE LAST EGG IS LAID AND CAN FOLLOW THE HEN WITHIN 12 HOURS OF HATCHING.

• EGG TOOTH

