

# Wild Turkey Cards



## Card 1

Scientists estimate that wild turkeys have been around for at least 10 million years. Wild turkeys are native only to the North and South American continents. Once there may have been as many as five different species. However, these likely became extinct in prehistoric times. Before European immigration, scientists estimate that 7 to 10 million turkeys were in North America.

Turkeys have been used as a source of food for thousands of years. At the Indian Knoll site in Kentucky, archeologists found large quantities of turkey bones, second only to the number of deer bones. Radiocarbon dating procedures indicated that these turkey bones existed before 3,000 B.C.

The use of turkey as food varied among Native Americans. The Navajos, Tonkawas, and Lipans ate turkey, as did the Native Americans living in Connecticut. However, many Apache would not eat turkey, and the Cheyenne believed that eating turkey would make them cowardly.

Turkey feathers were used widely by Native Americans to make blankets, quilts, dresses, coats, and robes. The Cheyenne, as well as other native groups, used turkey feathers on their arrows. In 1612, Captain John Smith noted turkey spurs (the sharp protrusions on the back of the legs of mature male turkeys) being used as arrow tips in Virginia. Feathers were also used to fashion ceremonial masks and headdresses. Turkey bones were used to make spoons, beads, and other ornaments.

Many Native American groups—like the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Mohawk—left turkey hunting to the children. Today's turkeys are very wary of people and are difficult to hunt.

## Card 2

During the 1600s when Europeans began settling in North America, wild turkeys still were very plentiful. In fact, in 1709 there were reports of turkeys numbering 500 to 1,000 birds in one flock. The settlers began to rely on turkeys as an important source of food because turkeys were so plentiful and the meat was tasty. The turkey's primary feathers also were used for writing quills.

As the continent's population grew (to more than 4 million by 1790), more forested land was cleared for farms, towns, cities, industries, roads, and railroads. Wildlife continued to provide food, clothing, and goods for trading and marketing. During this time, there were no effective laws regulating the use of land and wildlife. As expansion continued, wildlife became scarce near towns and cities; consequently, settlers were not able to go out easily to hunt for their own food.

From the late 1700s through the 1800s, market hunters helped supply food for settlers, selling deer, elk, turkey, bison, and other wildlife to markets and restaurants. Initially, wild turkeys sold for as little as 25 cents each. By 1900, turkeys were \$5 each in Chicago. Continued habitat loss, combined with market hunting, which allowed hunters to sell their game to markets for profit, was taking a toll on many wildlife species.

By 1813, wild turkeys were gone from Connecticut. They were last seen in Vermont in 1842, in New York in 1844, in Michigan in 1897, and in Iowa in 1907. By 1920, the wild turkey was lost from 18 of the original 39 states of its ancestral range and from the Canadian province of Ontario.



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## Card 3

All turkeys in the world, including the domesticated turkey, are classified into two species. The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is the most common turkey and is found throughout North America. The ocellated turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*) is the other species and is found on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, northern Belize, and the El Peten region of northern Guatemala. The wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is divided into six distinct subspecies. Of these, the eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) is the largest and most common subspecies. It originally ranged in the eastern half of the United States. Another subspecies, the Mexican turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo gallopavo*), is the forerunner of all domesticated turkeys we have in the world today. The Mexican turkey is the smallest of the six subspecies of the wild turkey. Originally, it was found in southern Mexico, but it is now considered extinct.

Domesticating a species involves raising the animals in captivity and selectively breeding them for generations. Usually they are bred to benefit people (e.g., more meat, etc.). Eventually, they become

very different from their ancestors in behavior and appearance.

When Hernando Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, the Aztecs already had large flocks of domesticated turkeys. The Aztecs had domesticated those turkeys from the Mexican wild turkey. How long the Aztecs kept domesticated turkeys is uncertain, but some scientists think those turkeys were introduced to Native Americans in the southwestern United States before 1350 A.D. The Aztecs used these birds mostly for their feathers and for sacrificial ceremonies. There are also reports that Montezuma, Aztec Emperor in 1519, fed about 500 domesticated turkeys daily to his menagerie of hawks, owls, and eagles.

By 1520, Spanish explorers took domesticated turkeys from Mexico to Spain. From there, the turkey quickly spread to Italy and France and then throughout Europe. By 1541, the domesticated turkey had reached England. By 1573, the turkey was so plentiful that it became part of the typical Christmas dinner. With selective breeding, new varieties of domesticated turkey were developed. By 1802, there were at least four standard varieties known in England.

## Card 4

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in the early 1500s, they were greatly impressed with the turkeys that had been domesticated by the Aztecs. Consequently, they took the domesticated turkey back to Spain, where farmers raised it throughout Europe.

Domesticated turkeys soon became part of the standard supplies sent with English colonists to America. In 1607, domesticated turkeys were brought back to North America with the settlers at Jamestown. Domesticated turkeys were also sent to help feed English colonists in Massachusetts in 1629. Soon small flocks of turkeys were being kept by many of the early colonists.

During the 1700s and 1800s, the propagation of domesticated turkeys stayed on a small, local scale. But even at this scale, changes were occurring to the domesticated turkey. The initial domesticated turkeys were smaller than the turkeys of today. They also were smaller than the eastern wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) found commonly throughout

the eastern United States. During this time there were reports that local farmers captured wild turkey gobblers (males) and bred them with domesticated turkey hens (females) to obtain a larger bird.

In the 1920s, large commercial turkey farms were established in the United States. By World War II, turkey farming was a major industry. Over the years, selective breeding of domesticated turkeys led to today's domesticated turkey. Domesticated turkeys are now larger and plumper than wild turkeys. Domesticated turkeys come in a variety of colors, and they cannot fly. (Some of the early breeding of domesticated turkeys was done for feather quality and not necessarily meat.) Some of the most popular domesticated turkeys are the Beltsville, Small White, Black, White Holland, and Bronze.

Turkey farming continues to be a major industry. The United States raised about 245 million turkeys in 2017, with Minnesota producing more turkeys than any other state.



# Wild Turkey Cards



## Card 5

Before European settlement, scientists estimate that there were 7 to 10 million wild turkeys in North America. By the 1930s, there were about 30,000 turkeys in the wild. The habitat destruction, unregulated hunting, and market hunting of the 1700s and 1800s decimated the wild turkey population throughout North America.

Land and wildlife were affected as the number of settlers grew. A few laws were passed to try to protect land and wildlife, but with the lack of consistent enforcement of the law throughout the country, most settlers did not realize that turkey populations were limited. By the end of the 1800s, the reduction in wildlife populations could not be ignored. By 1900, wild turkeys—along with deer, elk, bison, pronghorns, passenger pigeons, and other species—were reduced to small populations found only in a fraction of their original ranges. By 1914, the passenger pigeon became extinct. Many people feared that the wild turkey would suffer the same fate.

## Card 6

In 1891, the President of the United States was given the power to create forest reserves through the Forest Reserve Act. State laws and the Lacey Act of 1905—a federal law that limited interstate shipment of illegally taken wildlife—curtailed market hunting. The Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937 helped provide funds to states for use in wildlife recovery programs by placing an excise tax on hunting and sporting equipment. Many states established hunting regulations and seasons and now had wildlife agencies (though still small) and personnel to enforce those laws. Some states also established wild turkey refuges, setting aside land for turkeys until the population could rebound.

With the United States' entry into World War I in 1917 and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the conservation movement slowed. At the same time, abandoned farms and timbered forests reverted to the shrubs and forested land preferred by the wild turkey. After World War II, many state wildlife agencies started to make plans to restore wildlife populations, including the wild turkey.

Obtaining wild turkeys for use in restoration projects was difficult. One widely used method was to raise

Scientists, hunters, foresters, bird watchers, and others interested in turkey conservation formed organizations to urge conservation. In 1875, the American Forestry Association was founded, emphasizing the conservation of trees and forests. Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell established the Boone and Crockett Club, an association of hunters interested in conservation.

Naturalists and writers published books and articles promoting conservation. In 1876, John Muir wrote of the need for the government to protect the forests. Henry David Thoreau published *Walden* in 1854. In 1870, essays and stories were published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* deplored the destruction of American wildlife and attracting the attention of people throughout the country. In 1849, the Department of the Interior was formed, and by the end of the 19th century, some states had formed wildlife agencies. These organizations, as well as popular writings, slowly began to influence the opinions of the general public and lawmakers. The stage was set for the recovery of the wild turkey.

wild turkeys in pens and release them into the wild. This method was used for almost 20 years but ultimately was not successful. Pen-raised turkeys did not have the skills needed to survive in the wild.

In 1951, biologists began using the cannon-net method to trap wild turkeys for later transfer. A large net was concealed on the ground near bait and quickly propelled over feeding turkeys by an electronically detonated small cannon. Using this method, along with improving habitat for wild turkeys, state wildlife agencies were able to increase the wild turkey population in the United States to 1.3 million birds by the 1970s.

Throughout the conservation and restoration movement, volunteer conservation organizations greatly contributed to conserving habitat and wildlife populations. Since 1973, the National Wild Turkey Federation has partnered with state and federal wildlife agencies to provide support in the restoration of wild turkey populations. Today nearly 5 million turkeys can be found in North America, including all states in the United States except Alaska. These birds provide opportunities for bird watchers, hunters, and other people who appreciate wildlife.