


Colorado turkey, the Merriams



Tips  
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Each Thanksgiving, Americans consume 46 million turkeys. Fortunately, these are domestic and not the wild turkeys we have running around in our woods. Wild turkeys number around 7 million in the United States. But it was not always that way. In the 1930s, the population was down to less than 30,000, because of poaching and habitat destruction.

There are four subspecies in the U.S. that include the Merriams, Rio Grande, Osceola and the Eastern. If you head south of the border, you can find the Oscillated and the Goulds turkey.

Colorado is home to two subspecies of the turkey. One is the Rio Grande, which was introduced to our state in 1980. The Rio Grande lives mostly on the eastern side of Colorado, preferring river bottoms lined with cottonwood trees. The Rio Grande birds are often found in the farming areas of the plains.

The Colorado spring turkey hunting season opens up April 14 and runs through May 27 for us on the Western Slope. According to estimates from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife, CPW, the turkey is thriving here. The current population estimates exceed 35,000 birds, and they are present in 53 out of 64 counties across the state.

The native turkey to Colorado is the one that lives in the Montrose area and is called the Merriams or Mountain Turkey. This bird lives primarily west of Interstate 25, preferring the mountainous regions. The Merriams like open meadows and parks, oak brush and pinion junipers.

The noticeable difference between the two species might be the amount of white on the tips of the tail feathers. Merriams have some white on the very tips while the Rio Grande usually has a golden or brown tips.

A turkey has no sense of smell, like many other wild animals do, so they rely on very good hearing and eyesight to survive. The best way to describe their eyesight is with the word “incredible.” It has been said that a turkey can see an arm movement at 300 yards, and from my own experience, I can attest to that. Turkeys, when hunting, have busted me more than all other game animals combined. The turkey has no night vision, which is why they stay on a roost during the nighttime hours.

These birds are capable of flying up to 50 mph for short distances, and can run at 25 mph, to escape a predator.

Spring is the mating season for wild turkeys. The courting begins in the wintering areas, when the birds are still flocked together. Snow depth and temperatures play a part in how soon the birds move up into their spring/summer areas.

Males, or gobblers, try and attract the attention of the females by strutting and fanning their tail feathers into a beautiful display. Gobblers will fight off smaller males, called jakes, to try and keep the hens to themselves. The males use a variety of calls, the most popular being the gobble.

Once bred, the hens will take to the nesting site and begin laying eggs. The nests are usually located in the



A big Tom Merriams turkey in full strut. Notice the white on the tips of the fan. (Submitted photo/ Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

dirt, surrounded by vegetation, in an attempt to conceal the eggs. A hen will lay 10 to 12 eggs in her clutch during a two-week period. She will then incubate the eggs for 28 days until they hatch.

The newly hatched bird will be ready to leave the nest within 24 hours and begin feeding. The young birds, called poults, will feed on insects, berries and seeds, while adult birds will eat anything from acorns to small reptiles.

With the keen eyesight of a turkey, hunters must cover themselves in head to toe camouflage. Gloves and a face covering are a must. If time permits, building a small blind out of natural vegetation will also help conceal you from these cunning birds. Staying

perfectly still is the secret to success, as they can detect the slightest movement from long distances.

There are several types of calls available. The friction calls include the box and the slate call. Mouth calls, which have a latex reed in them, are also widely used. A good caller will be able to attract a bird from long distances, but this takes much practice to become skillful.

My own calling ability has been described as a motor vehicle crash, with no survivors, or fingernails dragging across a blackboard. Therefore, I must resort in taking someone more adept at calling, with me, when I go.

Shotguns are the weapons of choice, as rifles are forbidden during the spring season. Shot size must be No. 2 or smaller, and can be lead or steel. It is a good idea to pattern your shotgun before you go, so you know exactly where your gun shoots.

Colorado also has a fall turkey season that runs from Sept. 1 through Oct. 7, west of Interstate 25. During fall, both hens and gobblers are legal, but check the regulations before taking to the woods.

We have a pretty good-looking season ahead of us. Remember to bring a survival pack and extra warm clothes, as it is still winter in some parts of the high country. Enjoy the hunting season and good luck getting a gobbler. If you hear a sound in the woods, like a severe accident, just ignore it. It is just me trying to work a box call.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and an avid hunter who travels across North America in search of adventure and serves as a director and PIO for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org)



This picture was taken in Alabama a few weeks ago. It shows four Eastern tom turkeys. The Eastern has more tan and brown, with no white, in the fan. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/Mark Rackay)

Outdoor notes

The spring season dates for gobblers are April 14 through May 27. Over-the-counter tags are available for \$21 for Colorado residents. All of the hunting units in Montrose County are can be hunted with the over-the-counter tags.



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