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Zoo to You – Turkeys

11/16/17

Gobble! Gobble! Americans all over the country love to gobble up turkey! 228 million turkeys are consumed annually in the United States with over 20% on Thanksgiving alone, that's 46 million turkeys in one day! Domesticated turkeys can reach over 40lbs. When compared to another national favorite, the bald eagle, maxing out at 14lbs; the domesticated turkey is clearly the heavyweight. However, the domesticated turkey and its wild counterpart are birds of a different feather. At 25lbs, Wild turkeys are nearly half the size of the birds we hope to have served at our Thanksgiving dinner.

There are six sub-species of wild turkey scattered across our country. If you spot a flock of wild turkey while traveling through Kansas, it more than likely features the Rio Grande species. These birds are native to the central plains states and have reached population numbers over a million. The plumage (feathers) on their body often has a green sheen while the tips of their tail feathers feature a very light tan color. On the eastern side of the state, you may come across Eastern wild turkeys, with chestnut brown tail feathers that help the bird reach a height of nearly four feet tall when fanned out.

No matter what species of turkey you may find yourself facing, they share similar behaviors and characteristics. A turkey's most infamous vocalization is gobbling, the tom (male) turkey will use this unique sound to let hens (females) in the area know he is present; hens themselves typically stick to shorter chirps or clucking noises. Wild turkeys use a variety of calls, clucks, yelps, and purrs to communicate to their flock.

In addition to these sounds, they also use visuals to communicate with one another. You may have heard of a turkey strut. A strut is a combination of behaviors that turkeys use as a way to show dominance. The male turkey will fan out its tail feathers and puff out its body feathers to appear as large as possible as it picks up its legs and steps forward in short stomps. This display is done to attract

and impress the hens of the flock as well as tell other males in the area who the boss is.

Wild turkeys can also do something that domesticated turkeys cannot; they can fly! Wild turkeys can fly distances of more than a mile reaching speeds up to 55 miles per hour. A wild turkey's powerful legs can also propel it up to 25 miles per hour while running. These speeds, as well as the bird's natural ability to camouflage and move around almost silently, helps it elude predators, even those of the human variety.

Due to conservation efforts, wild turkey population numbers have increased in North America dramatically from 1.5 million in 1973 to 6.2 million birds today. This is due mostly to the National Wild Turkey Federation as well as state wildlife agencies that placed birds around the country through stocking programs. While the numbers have increased overall, they are down from a record 6.7 million. The reason wild turkey population numbers are declining again is due to habitat loss caused by human development and lack of proper land management. Another threat is an abundance of efficient nest predators such as crows, ravens, opossums, and raccoons.

Some threats to their populations are out of our hands, but many species do rely on human intervention to thrive. As turkeys lose their wild habitat; they have begun to move closer to suburban areas. It is important that we keep an eye out for flocks, especially those near busy roads. There are also many state and federal programs available to help land and property owners manage their space to help wild turkeys survive.

While you enjoy the product of its domestication at upcoming holiday meals, please consider the wild turkey and other native species we share our habitat with and the efforts we can make to help conserve them. Admiring from a distance and leaving wildlife alone, providing habitat resources in your own yard, or even switching to more reusable products are suggestions that can help species around the world flourish. This season I hope your homes are filled with friends and family, and your fridge is full of leftovers - including plenty of turkey!