

# Making Ripples

## Wild for Turkeys

by Amanda Bancroft

There are many awesome aspects of living in Northwest Arkansas, only one of which is the existence of wild turkeys. But at this time of year, in the hearts (and stomachs) of many of our residents, turkey is the main attraction.

Wild turkeys also captured the attention of John James Audubon, whose famous oil painting *Wild Turkey Cock, Hen and Young* (1826) now hangs in Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art as part of the exhibit “John James Audubon and the Artist as Naturalist,” going on now through January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Audubon is well-known for his interest in documenting America’s wildlife, and the turkey happened to be his favorite subject.

Many grade school children are also turkey artists, typically making flimsy construction paper turkeys from the traced shape of their tiny hands. But the real wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) that haunt the Ozarks with their intriguing gobbles are straight out of the imagination of a science fiction writer. The turkey got its name from the British, who, because of trade, associated these birds with the country of Turkey. Our own wild turkeys are native to North America. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, “It’s possible to distinguish wandering barnyard turkeys from wild individuals: Domestic turkeys have white tail tips like the original Mexican subspecies, while Wild Turkeys in North America have chestnut-brown tips.”

Just what is that thing hanging from the neck of a male turkey? Some birds, such as turkeys, chickens, and cassowaries, have wattles – a fleshy part of their anatomy that hangs from the head or neck and may be involved in attracting a mate or discouraging a rival male. Male turkeys can weigh more than eighteen pounds. The classic picture of a turkey most well-known today is a love struck one. All that plumage on the males is great for strutting to attract females. Hens lay up to seventeen eggs, typically one per day, and their poults are precocial, leaving the nest just one day after hatching! However, the hens stay nearby and watch over their growing brood.

So striking are wild turkeys that Benjamin Franklin thought they were “a much more respectable bird” for the symbol of the United States, in comparison with bald eagles that tend to steal their food from other hardworking birds of prey. Humans are the leading predators of turkeys, but they’re also vulnerable to predation from bobcats, great horned owls, foxes, coyotes, dogs, golden eagles and many more enemies. Turkeys themselves are omnivores, foraging among the vegetation for nuts, berries and seeds but also consuming insects and even amphibians like salamanders.

Turkeys have been an object of conservation for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission since their formation in 1915. While abundant in Arkansas when early settlers arrived, there were almost no turkeys left in the Ozarks and Ouachitas by the 1940’s. Restocking programs enabled the wild turkey population to recover throughout the state, and stands at an estimated 125,000 birds today. If you venture into their preferred habitat of mature forests, who knows – you might just get to see one off the menu in its fully alive glory!

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