

Cold Turkeys

After being successfully introduced far north of its historic range, could this bird thrive elsewhere in our chilly state?

BY ANDREW MCKEAN



MY BACK WAS CRAMPING AGAINST the scabby bark of the ponderosa pine, but I didn't dare squirm. A tom turkey was pumping his head up and down just 40 yards away, behind a screen of blooming hawthorns, and he was getting suspicious, wondering why he could not see a hen that would explain the hen calls I'd been making. Turkeys have phenomenal eyesight, and any twitch or even an eye blink on my part would send that gobbler back the way he had come, across a half-mile of peach-colored sandstone, scrub juniper, and sagebrush, into the sanctuary of the heavy timber.

I couldn't scrape another enticing cluck on my box call, cradled in my lap. Or turn my head to meet his wary stare. I couldn't even raise my shotgun, though the bird was now within range. Covered in camouflage clothing and head net, I was hidden only as long as I didn't move an inch.

Then the turkey, which was circling my hiding spot, stepped momentarily behind a pine tree. I shouldered my gun, and when he emerged from behind the trunk, the hunt was over, the dramatic tension of the previous half-hour dissolving with the echoes of gunshot.

I had never called a wild turkey before

that morning, though I had read plenty about how love-struck spring gobblers can be attracted by the right combinations of yelps, clucks, and purrs that mimic the sound of a receptive hen. Though I had practiced using a box call in my basement, I was sure the awful noise I made would appeal more to a kenneled hound than a discriminating tom turkey. So I was shocked when, at first light in those piney woods of southeastern Montana, I actually got a response to my manufactured yelp.

In the ten years since that morning, I've called other gobblers in other woods, and I don't recall the actual shots or the size of the birds as much as the sights of the hunt itself: the neon green of new tree leaves, the yellow haze of arrowleaf balsamroot on open hillsides, and crisp white crocuses emerging from brown pine needles at my feet. Compared to the sterile snowscape of November's deer season, April's fertile turkey woods are downright sensual.

The birds are, too. Toms strut about open areas, puffing out their chest, fanning their tail feathers, arching their wings, and turning pirouettes and circles—all in an attempt to intimidate rivals and appeal to hens. In the spring, the white-and-blue head of male wild turkeys periodically fills with blood and turns a bright red, which contrasts strikingly against the purple-black of the body feathers. To keep rivals from mating with hens, toms will often fight, leaping and kicking to lacerate opponents with their sharp leg spurs.

The male's springtime gobble electrifies hunters and anyone else who has ever heard the thunderous declaration echo through hills and valleys. Created by compressing and releasing air in a complex set of anatomical "pipes," the gobble can be heard for miles, especially from an elevated perch. It's a call to draw hens in for breeding, and a pronouncement of a gobbler's dominance.

A LONG TRIP NORTH

Southeastern Montana's woods didn't always echo with gobblers. Until the mid-1950s, this state had no wild turkeys, and there is no archeological evidence to indicate that the species ever existed anywhere in the West much farther north of modern-day Denver. Various strains of the American wild turkey evolved in the hardwoods of the



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TURKEY TROT A tom turkey jogs along a meadow in northwestern Montana. Previously undocumented in this state, Montana's first wild turkeys were shipped here from Arizona and Colorado in the 1950s and released near Lewistown and Ekalaka. In the 1960s, pen-reared turkeys from Pennsylvania were released in the Flathead Valley and have since spread throughout the area.

East and Southeast (the Eastern subspecies), the palmetto swamps of Florida (the Osceola subspecies), the brushy rivers of Texas (the Rio Grande subspecies), and the pine ridges of the Four Corners area in southwestern Colorado and northeastern Arizona (the Merriam's subspecies).

Across most of their native range, wild turkeys were hunted nearly to extinction in the 1800s. But the species began to recover in the mid- to late 20th century as state and federal wildlife agencies across the United States trapped birds from existing populations and transplanted them into unoccupied habitat. Today wild turkeys are found in every state except Alaska.

In 1954, encouraged by successful introductions of the Merriam's subspecies into Wyoming and South Dakota's Black Hills, biologists with the then-named Montana Department of Fish and Game released the state's first wild

turkeys in the Judith Mountains north and east of Lewistown. Over the next few years, they also released birds in the Long Pines area southeast of Ekalaka and in the Ashland area. The birds fared especially well in the Long Pines, growing from the initial 18 turkeys to

nearly 1,000 in just three years. During Montana's first turkey hunt, held in 1958, hunters shot roughly 100 birds.

Heartened by the department's early success, state biologists began trapping the home-grown turkeys and moving them to new areas. Bob Greene, a state wildlife biologist in the 1950s, was a key player in Montana's wild turkey restoration efforts. The state's main turkey trapper during those early years, Greene still marvels at how the birds thrived in most initial release sites.

Andrew McKean is an FWP information officer at Glasgow.

"Those birds took in every place we ever put them, almost without fail," says Greene, now retired and living in Warm Springs. "I think the success was partly due to gentle weather and good nesting cover, but mainly it was food. We tried to put them in habitat that was like what they came from, with yellow pine and a good grass understory."

Over the next 30 years, the department moved more than 1,500 turkeys to sites across Montana, sometimes supplementing existing flocks but more frequently putting turkeys into new habitat.

Turkeys are adaptable birds that can survive in a range of conditions. The basic habitat requirements are mature trees for roosting, nearby grassy cover for nesting, and accessible food and water. The birds are opportunists, eating anything from worms and beetles to berries and grains.

Like other upland birds, wild turkeys are vulnerable to certain weather conditions. Too hot in the spring, and chicks can suffocate in their eggs. Too wet and cold after they hatch, and the young birds might not find enough insects to sustain them in their first few weeks. Wild turkeys also can't survive many winters without brushy sanctuaries to escape the wind and locate

food not covered in snow. If the weather stays too cold for too long, turkeys can't maintain their core body temperature, especially if high-calorie foods are hard to find. However, in areas where supplemental food is available, such as from ranchers' haystacks or silage pits, turkeys can generally make it through even the toughest Montana winters.

In some of the state's northern and high-altitude areas, where snow gets too deep or there is little ranching or agricultural use, the transplanted birds didn't survive. But in many areas, wild turkey flocks have grown enough to support regulated hunting seasons.

In the core turkey habitat of southeastern Montana, where I shot my first Merriam's tom, hunters may kill two gobblers in the spring season. Hunting is also allowed in much of western Montana (though by special permits valid only for defined areas), and turkey numbers are increasing in the lower Clark Fork River and Libby areas and the Bitterroot and Yellowstone valleys. Though the department hasn't finished compiling harvest survey data for the last five years, it appears that both hunting pressure and harvest are up significantly, especially for the spring gobbler season. (Hunting is also permitted in the fall, when either a male or a female turkey may be shot.)

COULD THERE BE MORE?

Like other wildlife species restored to unoccupied habitat—including elk, pronghorn, and Canada geese—the introduction and spread of wild turkeys in Montana is one of the state's wildlife management success stories. Currently, wild turkeys live in at least a portion of most counties due to natural migration or state transplants.

Yet there may be potential for turkeys to occupy additional habitat in Montana and for more people to enjoy the sport of turkey hunting. Dale Manning thinks so. Vice president of the National Wild Turkey Federation's Montana chapter, Manning would like FWP to beef up its trap-and-transplant program to fill unoccupied habitat.

"Montana's best habitat already has turkeys, but there is unfilled habitat in many western valleys and foothills where they could do well," says the Missoula taxidermist.

Greene isn't so sure that would work. He has observed how transplanted wild turkey flocks descend on livestock feeding operations during the winter. The hungry turkeys peck seed heads out of stacked hay bales and even run feedlot cattle away from silage and grain. Greene says the only reason some of those flocks survived is that landowners put up with the depredation.

Landowner tolerance remains a key factor when FWP considers turkey releases. Because the birds are such charismatic creatures, most people like seeing a few turkeys.

But as the initial Long Pines flock demonstrated, turkey populations can explode in just a few years, and a handful quickly can become hundreds. Wildlife managers are leery of putting new flocks in areas where the birds might become nuisances to landowners, even if the habitat is suitable.

That's what happened in northwestern Montana's Flathead Valley, where a flock of pen-raised Eastern subspecies turkeys was released in the early 1960s. The valley's small-scale livestock operations and hobby farms provided supplemental food, and turkey populations boomed. But so did nuisance complaints. FWP started a widespread spring turkey hunt there in 2002 to reduce the flock size and scatter birds away from farms and homesteads.

Because wild turkeys need large tracts of habitat, suburban sprawl is another factor limiting their spread. According to Jeff Herbert, assistant chief of FWP's Wildlife Division, the department has been reluctant to expand turkey populations to areas where prime turkey habitat is being replaced by subdivisions and strip malls.

Between 1990 and 2003, fewer than 300 turkeys were moved into new sites, partly because the department did not want to create more nuisance problems and partly because, says Herbert, "the best habitat is already occupied by turkeys."

Manning, however, argues that FWP could do more to find new release sites in addition to the dozen the agency has already approved for future releases. He and other wild turkey advocates also want the department to take more interest in how existing flocks are faring. They say state biologists should survey populations, collect better harvest data, and conduct gobbling routes similar to the spring crowing surveys used to chart pheasant population trends. And the department needs to develop a wild turkey management plan that outlines population and distribution goals.

"Turkey hunting is one of the fastest growing hunting activities in the country, and Montana is becoming known as a destination state," Manning says. "Can our existing populations handle more hunting pressure? If so, how much more? We currently don't have any consistent ways to



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answer those questions."

Though Herbert agrees that FWP could do more, he notes that the department is still trapping and transplanting birds, "though not at the level some might want." He adds that the department has signed up Block Management Areas containing turkey

NOT QUITE YET A hunter waits for two toms to part so he doesn't wound the half-hidden bird when firing at the front one. Turkey hunting is similar to early-season elk hunting in that both species must be lured in with enticing calls, and both are exceptionally cautious animals, requiring stealth and patience.

populations to provide increased hunting opportunities, and it is working with ranchers to develop rest-rotation grazing systems in southeastern Montana to benefit turkeys and other wildlife species. A lack of staff, he adds, restricts the department from doing much more.

When it comes to putting turkeys into previously occupied areas, Herbert says the department needs to scrutinize each site before attempting any releases.

“If we’ve tried to put birds in there in the past and they’re gone now, that says something about limitations of the habitat or changes that have taken place since the introduction,” he says. “Studying those limiting factors would be far more productive than simply releasing more birds back into that area.”

Herbert adds that FWP is more open to transplanting turkeys into new, suitable habitats that haven’t been tried in the past: “If there have never been birds in an area, and important habitat components are in place, then certainly it’s worth trying.”

Herbert says the department would welcome help moving birds and then monitoring their populations in the new release sites. “That strikes us as a good use of volunteer assistance,” he says. “We’re just not keen on introducing and managing birds in marginal areas, which would become a put-and-take scenario, not responsible wildlife management.”

As for a wild turkey management plan, Herbert agrees that such a document could help outline management issues and potential strategies for achieving goals. But a more pressing priority is for FWP to finish its upland game bird management plan, which will include a section on wild turkeys.

“We’ve recently hired someone to take the

lead on the plan, and he can certainly work with Wild Turkey Federation members to include their concerns,” Herbert says. He adds that FWP will consider producing a separate wild turkey plan in the future if time and funding permit.

“If we didn’t have such a rich array of hunting opportunities, or if we had limited species like other states, then turkeys would be a larger part of our management responsibility,” he says. “Even though it’s popular with some hunters, turkey hunting is still a small component of Montana’s overall hunting opportunities.”

It may be small, but Manning and others believe that it could be bigger. And that more people should get the chance to call in a big gobbler, to hide beneath a tree, heart pounding, and wait for the cautious bird to move within shotgun range.

It’s an opportunity both FWP and turkey advocates want to promote.

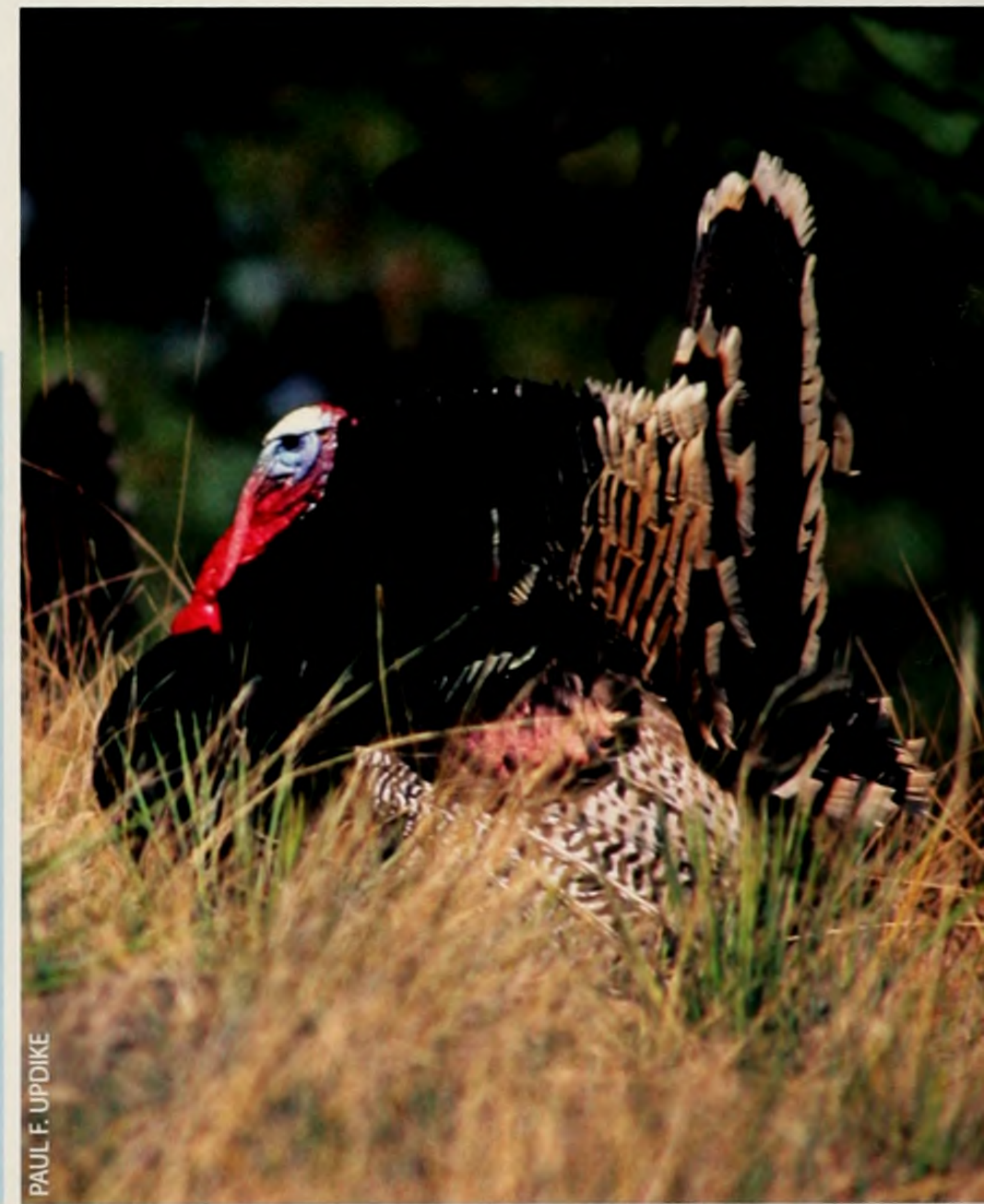
On a recent Montana wild turkey hunt, ten years after my first one, I sit alone on a timbered ridge overlooking the serpentine Tongue River, as thankful for the solitude as I am

for the warm gobbler at my side. I was up well before dawn, and the noontime sun is making me drowsy. It’s tempting to nap here awhile, but I have to get back and break camp.

While picking my way down the ridge, I hear a gobble in the distance. I can’t imagine these woods without that sound, which to me has become as much the anthem of spring as a rutting elk’s bugle announces the arrival of autumn.

But whether such gobblers fill the woods in new Montana sites depends on many factors. Weather will need to remain mild during most winters, and quality habitat must be preserved. But most important, turkey advocates and FWP will need to work together. These great birds are still relative newcomers to Montana, and they need all the help they can get in what continues to be an often inhospitable landscape. 🦃

TALKING TURKEY Wild turkey advocates have told Montana FWP that they want the department to do more for their favorite game bird. The department replies that it currently lacks staff to increase wild turkey management activities much beyond what it is doing now. Both agree, however, that the wild turkey introduction has been one of Montana’s great wildlife management success stories, and that there could be additional habitats elsewhere in the state to further that expansion.



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