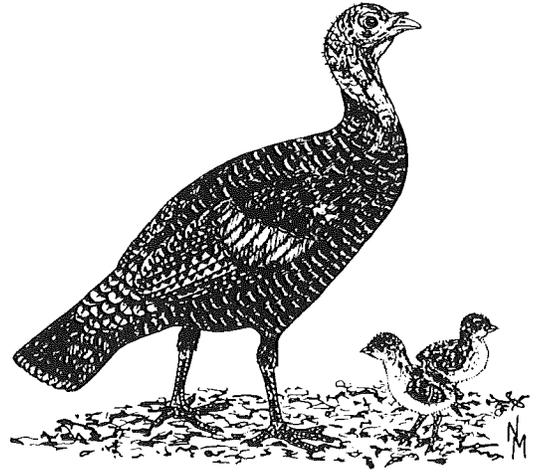


## Wild Turkey

*Meleagris gallopavo*

The Wild Turkey is native only to the Western Hemisphere, but was exported to Europe by the conquistadors; there, because of confusion with another recent import via the Turkish Empire—the African guinea fowl—our native bird acquired the name of a foreign land (Aldrich 1965). However, this largest of North American upland gamebirds, once proposed by Benjamin Franklin to be our national symbol, was extirpated from much of New England by the mid-1800s through destruction of its forest habitat.

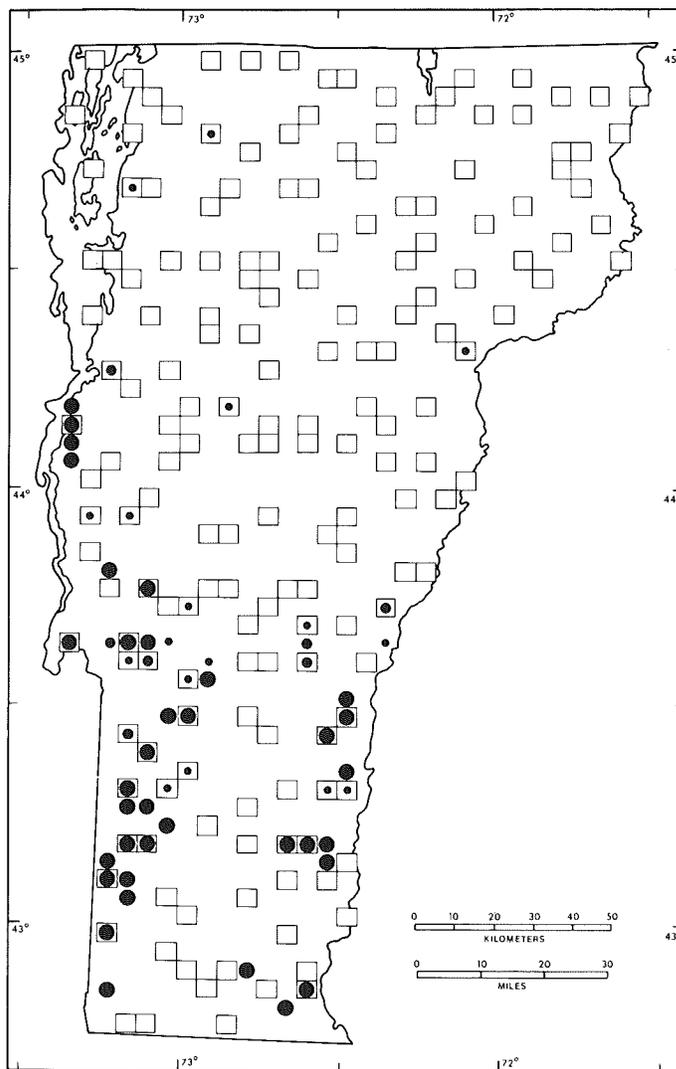
The Wild Turkey currently numbers some 15,000 birds in Vermont (J. Wallin, pers. comm.) as a result of a highly successful re-introduction program carried out by the Vermont Fish and Game Department. In 1969 and 1970, 31 Wild Turkeys brought from western New York were released in two locations—Pawlet and Hubbardton. In 1972 instate relocation of trapped birds began. Wallin (1983) stated that between 1972 and 1982 “range extension has been expedited through the instate trap-and-transfer of 177 birds to 10 towns: Brattleboro, Bennington, Halifax, Dummerston, Milton, Weybridge, Norwich, Bristol, Jericho, and Grand Isle. Wild Turkeys now occur in a general range encompassing about 40% of the state.” Hunting seasons have been expanded as the population has grown. In 1983, the eleventh spring hunt saw 294 birds taken; an average of 800 turkeys are taken in each fall hunt. Since Vermont has more Wild Turkeys than other New England states, its hunting kills greatly exceed those of the region’s other states (Vt. Fish and Game Dept., *News and Notes* 1983). Nature watchers and hunters have benefited from this reestablishment of an extirpated species. Wild Turkeys were regularly sighted (4 out of 5 years) during the Atlas Project period on the Christmas Bird Counts in Bennington, Brattleboro, Saxtons River, and Rutland (RVB, Winter 1977–81). Sighting



these impressive birds, which stand 0.9–1.2 m (3–4 ft) tall and weigh 8.2–10.9 kg (18–24 lbs), along a snowy road in winter is surely a thrill.

Historically, the Wild Turkey’s Vermont range appears to have included the state’s four southern counties (Foote 1946); in the mid-1800s the Wild Turkey still had a foothold “in the mountains of the southern part of the state,” according to Thompson (1842). The turkey’s habitat requirements include mature hardwood forests—which provide nuts, seeds, and roosting trees—interspersed with open farmlands or grasslands to provide the insects that the young particularly need (Wallin 1983). Land that is only 12% forested (such as the countryside of small woodlots around Addison, Bridport, and Pantton) can provide suitable habitat, as long as hedgerows are present (Wallin 1983). Reintroduction in Vermont would have been impossible before the 1950s and 1960s, when forests had regenerated enough to provide suitable habitat for the species (J. Wallin, pers. comm.).

The Wild Turkey’s courtship behavior is well known and dramatic: the male struts and gobbles in woodland clearings to attract the hens (Bent 1932; Aldrich 1967a; Terres 1980). The female prepares the nest, lays the eggs, and raises the young. Nests are placed in leaf-lined scrapes or depressions in the ground, often under fallen limbs, and



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 35 (20%)  
 Possible breeding: 14 (40% of total)  
 Probable breeding: 5 (14% of total)  
 Confirmed breeding: 16 (46% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	7	23	20.0
Green Mountains	3	5	8.5
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	1	5	3.0
Taconic Mountains	14	87	40.0
Eastern Foothills	10	42	28.5

also in hayfields and slash (J. Wallin, pers. comm.). Ten to 12 eggs are laid, and the female incubates for 27 to 28 days. In Vermont, incubation is concentrated during the first 8 days of May (Wallin 1983). Atlas Project dates for nests with eggs are May 21 in Proctor and June 20 in Brattleboro; the sole date for recently hatched young is May 26. The most frequently used confirmation code was FL, for recently fledged young; five dates for FLs were between June 28 and July 23.

Because the Wild Turkey has been well studied in Vermont, it is one of the few species for which the Atlas Project produced no

new data. Turkeys were most abundant in southern Vermont, occurring in high numbers in the priority blocks of the Taconic Mountains, and moderate numbers in the Eastern Foothills. The species was absent from the North Central region and Northeast Highlands. The Wild Turkey is an interesting, wily, and colorful readdition to Vermont's wildlife.

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