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## Birds of the Great Plains: Family Meleagrididae (Turkeys)

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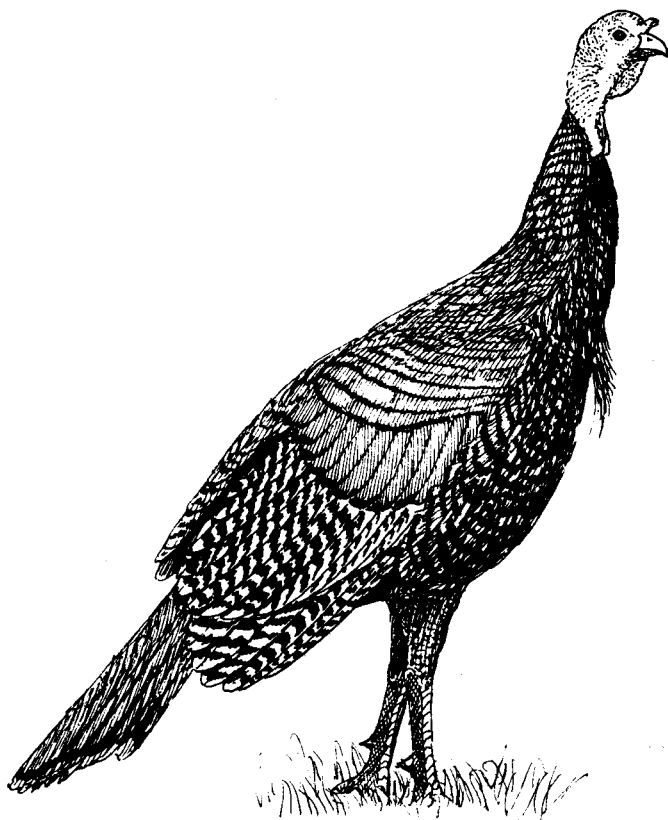
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# FAMILY MELEAGRIDIDAE (TURKEYS)



Wild Turkey

## Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*

**Breeding Status:** Originally resident over much of the region but extirpated from most areas, with indigenous populations persisting from southern Kansas southward. Reintroductions have repopulated nearly all the states in this region except for western Iowa and western Minnesota, where the status of introductions in several counties (Clay, Becker, Otter Tail) is in doubt.

**Breeding Habitat:** Breeding habitats vary greatly among the several subspecies; in the southern Rio Grande race the birds are found in very arid habitats dominated by short grasses but including the scattered trees necessary for roosting as well as a water supply and succulent vegetation. The Merriam race of the Badlands, Black Hills, and Pine Ridge country is typically associated with red cedar and ponderosa pines, running water, and rugged topography. The eastern race, native to eastern Oklahoma, eastern Kansas, and adjacent Missouri, is adapted to a variety of hardwood trees, of which oaks and other mast-bearing species are most important.

**Nest Location:** Nests are in well-concealed locations in forested areas, often under a log or a bush or at the base of a tree. The nest is lined with dead leaves.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 8 to 15 eggs, buffy with reddish or brownish spots. The incubation period is 28 days, starting with the last egg. Single-brooded.

**Time of Breeding:** Egg dates in Oklahoma are from May 5 to July 18, and dependent young have been seen from May 8 to August 6. Texas egg dates are from February 15 to July 25.

**Breeding Biology:** Turkeys spend the winter in small flocks consisting of adult males or larger groups of hens and family units. When the "gobbling" season begins the males may establish individual gobbling or strutting areas, but groups of brothers typically associate, displaying in synchrony and allowing the most dominant of the brothers to fertilize any female that is attracted. Additionally, single highly aggressive males may dominate entire local populations, in a manner equivalent to the "master cock" situation in grouse. Females have brief contact with males until they are fertilized, then they establish their nests. Within a week the chicks can make short flights, and they soon begin to roost in trees. When young males reach the age of 6-7 months they may break away from their families and begin to establish brother unions that will persist for their entire lives.

**Suggested Reading:** Watts and Stokes 1971; Lewis 1973.

