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# Backyard Birder

## Wild Turkey Courtship

by Brenda Sens



*Displaying male Wild Turkey by Len Medlock.*

In June, Sylvia Miskoe posted an e-mail to NHBirds (6-17-16) in which she reported seeing “a large tom in full display walking behind two hens across the back pasture. At the far end, he un-puffed and ate buttercup flowers.” The description led to general curiosity about the courtship displaying behavior of Wild Turkeys and I did some research on the subject.

Adult male turkeys are called gobblers or toms and the immature males are referred to as jakes. There are subtle differences between the two. Jakes have tail feathers that are taller in the center and shorter on the sides whereas the adult tail feathers are equal in length. The beard on jakes is two to three inches long and that on adults is from five to twelve inches in length. The mating behavior of male turkeys bears a strong resemblance to that of peacocks. They try to attract females by puffing up their feathers, spreading their tails and dragging their wings. The behavior is called strutting. Mood alone can cause their necks and the tops of their head to change color in a matter of seconds and they can be red, white, or blue. Although it seems counter-intuitive, a solid white head and neck indicates the highest state of excitement. Vocalizations, too, play a large role in attracting mates and toms are capable of numerous ones. Their gobbles can carry as far as a mile. In addition, they drum, boom, yelp and spit. This same behavior, when directed at other males, is a show of dominance and aggression.

Often, two closely related males display together. This behavior usually results in the dominant turkey fathering

more eggs than he would if courting alone. Because half the genetic make-up of the two male turkeys is identical, the less dominant male benefits by increasing his chances of passing along his genetic material more than he would on his own. Videos of courting behavior may be found online.

Display behavior is most often seen in the early spring, although males often display during other seasons when they come in contact with females. Turkeys are polygamous and the males leave in search of other females after mating, leaving the female to nest and protect the young on her own. A day after hatching, the young are ready to leave the nest and eat on their own while depending on the female for protection. By the time the poults are fourteen weeks old, the sexes differ in appearance.

There is much about a turkey that only a fellow turkey can love. Both sexes have fleshy bumps called caruncles on their heads and necks. Males also sport dewlaps, flaps of skin that stretch from the lower beak to the neck, and snoods, which are loose bits of skin that dangle from the upper mandible of the beak. The size of the snood relates to the health of the male. By the time winter arrives, the young are adult size.



*Wild Turkeys by Jason Lambert.*

Females and males spend the winter in separate flocks. The young are ready to mate by the time they are a year old, but males of that age do not compete successfully against older males as a rule.

The return of turkeys to the wild in the northeast has been a heartwarming success story and they are always a delight to observe.