

# Where are “Those Dang Wild Turkeys?”

By Sherry E Engler

Perhaps, one of the greatest joys of living in Rim Country is the gift of viewing wildlife like the massive bull elk, the slender white-tail deer, the leaping wonder jack-rabbit and the wild turkey. What? Wild turkey? No one, hardly anyone, IF EVER, ever sees a wild turkey! (Not the human kind of wild turkey one may see on occasion in town but the honest to goodness, natural wild turkey!) The wild turkey is NOT going to be seen by many people, children, hunters, especially hunters, because these critters are just too, too smart to be visible to the nature enthusiast!

After trying for many years, on many, many occasions, to see a turkey in the wild in Mogollon Rim Country, I have concluded wild turkeys are on the same scale as Big Foot. Look and look and look and never, ever see one. Do they even exist? After conducting an in-depth study (asking a few relatives and hunting associates), I have been assured that yes the wild turkey does habitat in our beautiful mountainous terrain. Surprisingly, many of the hunters in the survey were “just within seconds of shooting the Granddaddy turkey of them all, probably a fifty pounder.” But, “dag nabbit, just slipped out of sight, like MAGIC.”

My scientific, very scientific, survey led me to a few honest hunters who, when asked about wild turkey hunts, exclaimed exasperatedly, “Don’t know where those dang wild turkeys are!” Therefore, I am very thankful as Thanksgiving nears, we do not rely on the talents of these hunters for our Thanksgiving dinner. (Looks like it’s going to be a Butterball wrapped in plastic with the giblets inside.)

The Fall Turkey Hunt, in which a tag permit is required for the limited Weapon-Shotgun Shooting Shot Hunt, is already over as is the Archery Only Hunt. These hunts are usually held from late August through September, ending in early October. Therefore, if you are interested in obtaining a turkey for next Thanksgiving through your hunting endeavors, please see Arizona Game and Fish for proper permit tags and instructions. However, if you are like me and just want to see one in the wild, taking only shots with your phone or camera, you may want to study the wild turkey before trying to apprehend one in photos.

Rim Country is primarily inhabited by Merriam wild turkeys. The Merriam wild turkey was named after Clinton Hart Merriam, the first chief of the US Biological Survey in 1900. The Merriam Tom turkey may weigh between fifteen to thirty pounds (not fifty) and the hen may weigh between eight to twelve pounds (not fifty). Merriam turkeys eat a variety of insects along with juniper berries, acorns, grass seeds and weeds. Their primary enemies are coyotes, bobcats, owls, foxes and, rarely, the human species in the form of a hunter. These turkeys like altitudes between 3,500 and 10,000 feet. As winter approaches, the hen and her poults (baby turkeys) will join other hens and poults to form a flock. These flocks will travel high in the mountains if snow does not hinder their existence, at which time the flock will descend to lower elevations.

Because the Merriam turkey is primarily a creature of habit, usually watering at least once every day, if you find a “watering hole” (hunter’s term) and sit on it for hours and hours, maybe days and days, eventually, if you are quiet enough, the turkeys should approach the watering hole. As one hunter in my survey said, “It takes PATIENCE! And lots of them.”

Ironically, one individual, questioned about hunting turkeys, claimed Unit 22 was perhaps the best for spotting these delicious feathered friends. The area north of Tonto Village on Turkey Ridge (LOL) was his recommendation. He even kept a straight face when giving the directions to Turkey Ridge. HONESTLY!

Other bits of information you may need to know before seeking out the existence of these rarely sighted birds are their forms of communication. In the Merriam Turkey Language, there are 28 distinctly different calls with distinct meaning in their gobbles, screeches and squeaks.

According to a reliable hunting source (who has never gotten a turkey), he uses box calls aggressively to get the gobbler's attention. He prefers to use the Ol' Mama Hen call and, once again, lots of PATIENCE.

Another tip and words of advice are these turkeys have excellent eyesight and very keen hearing. They are infamous for playing games such as "Over the river and through the woods, oh where did the turkey go?" or "Turkey of the Mountain," "Hide and Seek" or "Squeak the box until you're crazy." Therefore, you may want to wear very comfortable boots, warm clothing and take along a good sense of humor.

However, I must tell you that, while visiting Oklahoma, I was fortunate enough to see a flock of Rio Grande wild turkeys. Perhaps, it is in the numbers as to why it is so very hard to see a wild turkey in Arizona. Rio Grande wild turkeys number between 1,002,700 to 1,025,700 while Merriam wild turkeys number between 334,460 to 344,460 (which I personally believe to be exaggerated).

Wishing you and yours a very blessed Thanksgiving as you too may be wondering, "Where are those dang wild turkeys?"