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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES



Keenly aware of the presence of predators, turkeys will reduce their gobbling and move considerable distances to elude hunters according to Ryan Williamson, a wildlife technician with Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

Ensuring sustainable wild turkey populations

Frances Figart

Word from the Smokies

If you plan to travel around Western North Carolina or East Tennessee to visit friends or family and eat turkey for the coming Thanksgiving holiday, there is a good chance you'll spot a few wild turkeys along the way. Although sometimes we humans may call one another "turkey" as a lighthearted insult, our species can actually learn a lot from the big bird known as *Meleagris gallopavo*.

Evidence suggests the first turkeys existed as early as 20 million years ago. The modern turkey is related to other game birds like pheasants, quail, grouse, and partridges. There are five subspecies of turkey, each differing in plumage and range. Wild turkeys

have keen eyesight, are born with innate knowledge of predators and landscape, and are talkative, gregarious animals. They maintain a strong family or "clan" mentality and are superb communicators and collaborators.

"When given the opportunity to study them in graduate school, I realized turkeys were a fascinating species," said Michael J. Chamberlain, a professor of wildlife ecology with the University of Georgia who grew up hunting turkeys and now studies their behavior all over the Southeast. "Turkeys communicate in various ways from vocalizations to appearance. It is believed that turkeys primarily recognize each other through these vocalizations and the appearance of their heads."

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How to cook Thanksgiving turkey – and handle the leftovers

Mackensy Lunsford

Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Editor's note: This story was first published in 2015, but safety rules remain the same.

ASHEVILLE - On Thanksgiving Day, many a novice cook will take a stab at preparing one of the biggest meals of the year. And novice or no, how many times a year do you generally cook a turkey? If you answered more than once or twice, you're in the minority.

The fact of the matter is that not many know how to do it. And some would swear up and down that they know how, but know nothing of proper thawing and cooking — not to mention cross-contamination.

Keeping a sterile work area is essential to the harmony of the post-holiday meal period. Improper handling of turkeys — and poultry in general — can

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Young voters call anti-TikTok politicians 'out of touch'

Savannah Kuchar

USA TODAY

"It was brutal," Rep. Jeff Jackson, D-N.C., told his viewers in a March TikTok video, posted days after a heated congressional hearing over the popular social media platform.

In a rare bipartisan pile-on, lawmakers from both sides of the aisle had grilled TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew for more than four hours over fears that the popular app is a national security threat. TikTok is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, and leaders from across the political spectrum have expressed concerns the app could be used to spy on its 73 million American users, and to spread misinformation.

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Smokies

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Of particular interest to Chamberlain are the social hierarchies that influence how individual turkeys behave throughout their lives. Male and female wild turkeys spend much of the year together in a flock.

“Pecking orders introduce structure into the flocks we observe,” said Chamberlain. “This structure is something we do not fully understand, but it clearly influences how they behave and interact throughout the year.”

Both males and females maintain pecking orders in which a dominate bird holds sway over subordinates. These pecking orders begin to form when birds are only a few days old, but they are also fluid and ever-changing.

“Turkeys constantly test these pecking orders, by fighting, pecking at each other, chasing each other, and so forth, seeking to challenge the dominant bird and move up in the hierarchy,” Chamberlain said. “These pecking orders dictate access to resources and breeding opportunities in the spring.”

As spring arrives, males begin their “lek” or group-based breeding rituals. Females will lay an egg each day for 14 days and then incubate the eggs for 28 days until they all have hatched. The young poults are raised by their mother

without any fraternal care. The male poults, or jakes, will generally be kicked out of the group the following spring by dominant gobblers.

Wild turkeys were plentiful when European colonists first came to Southern Appalachia. By the early 1900s, however, only a few were left, a decline that continued into the midcentury due to unregulated hunting, rapid deforestation, and habitat destruction.

Thankfully, biologists in the 1950s began to capture surviving individuals in various places and relocate them to suitable habitat with the help of an innovative trap known as a rocket net. These relocation efforts continue today, with birds still being moved to areas in the South where populations have not done as well.

“The restoration of this iconic species is considered one of the greatest conservation success stories in the world,” Chamberlain said, “yet turkeys face ongoing challenges that have resulted in population declines in some areas.”

Turkey researchers in Southern Appalachia are focused on ensuring that we have sustainable populations of wild turkeys in the future. Seeming to have a preternatural cognition of their near extinction in the not-so-distant past, the birds exhibit a keen understanding of the constant threat of predators, including humans.

“During spring the males will gobble

to announce their presence on the landscape and hens will call or 'yelp' to let males know that they are present in an area," said Ryan Williamson, a wildlife technician with Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "But they will reduce their spring gobbling to near silence to elude hunting pressure. So, they are aware of the presence of predators and adjust accordingly to survive."

It is estimated that more than 500 wild turkeys live in the park, but Williamson says the exact number is unknown. "The population does appear to be stable and healthy," he said, "and seems to be growing every year based on the number of surviving poults seen along roadways."

But over the past several years, Williamson and other park wildlife managers have begun to observe some human conflicts with turkeys.

"In the park, where humans are not a predator of turkeys, we are seeing an increase in the number of animals that are habituated to people and getting easy meals from visitors," he explains. "Most animals that have been fed by humans appear to lose their natural fear of people and learn to approach them for food, which most humans find threatening. These turkeys can be aggressive towards humans to acquire food, especially during the springtime when they are naturally aggressive towards each other and will fight to establish dominance."

Wild turkeys thrive in areas with abundant grasses and shrubby vegetation that grows low to the ground. These plants harbor abundant insects and seeds, which dominate turkey diets. The habitats where wild turkeys thrive are also critically important to other species, such as elk and black bears, who share their requirement for hard mast like acorns in the winter. Ultimately, managing parks and forest lands to ensure turkeys can thrive should mean success for many other important species.

In the Smokies, some of the best places for viewing turkeys are in the relatively open fields of Cades Cove, Cataloochee, and Oconaluftee, along forest edges, and in open woodlands and forest clearings. Early morning is typically an ideal time for birding.

If you'd like to learn more about turkeys and other birds in the Smokies, you can pick up a copy of the newly revised "Birds of the Smokies" field guide by Fred J. Alsop III at any visitor center bookstore in Great Smoky Mountains National Park or online at SmokiesInformation.org.

Frances Figart is the editor of "Smokies Life" journal and the creative director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

Access

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But the Hot Springs access point is not the only access point MountainTrue is focused on, as the organization is aiming to shore up Marshall's river access points, too.

“Marshall is infrastructurally kind of challenging with river access,” Henderson said. “You’ve got a dam on the upstream side. You’ve got basically a seawall at river right, kind of like a railroad reinforcement wall that makes taking out even harder. You’ve got the dam at river left there.

"So, when people are taking multiday trips in that corridor, we usually advise people to take out above Marshall, portage all the way around Capitola Dam,

and also Redmon Dam. There's no real safe portage around Redmon Dam right now. We're working to improve that.

Henderson said MountainTrue has secured funding to create a conceptual plan and pre-construction site design at Redmon Dam, the scope of which will include improved parking, established access areas, signage and passive park infrastructure like picnic tables and angling areas.

"We're interested in making river access better, and we're also interested in making it a place where people can go down and have lunch and relax by the water or fish in the water, even if they're not paddling downstream," Henderson said.

Great Trail State

In 1987, the North Carolina General

Assembly officially established the French Broad River Paddle Trail as a state trail.

In 2021, a coalition of nonprofit organizations throughout the state lobbied for the state to be recognized as the Great Trails State.

“They were trying to raise awareness for how cool that was for our state, but also trying to get some funding together,” Henderson said. “That coalition was successful in lobbying our state legislature to appropriate quite a bit of funding for the state parks program, which oversees the state trail program, and also for the partner organizations. There’s one partner organization for each state trail. MountainTrue is the partner organization for the French Broad State Trail.”

In addition to that successful lobbying in 2021, the state also allotted additional funding to the state trail program

in 2023. That state appropriation will be focused on investing in the trail system to tackle deferred maintenance, including buildings bridges and trails and improving access points, Henderson said.

“Hot Springs is a river town,” Henderson said. “We’re on the water. It’s right there. But there’s surprisingly kind of little public access. In terms of having a place where residents can walk on down to the water from town without crossing the bridge, I think has been identified for quite a while in terms of master plans and just informal public input. So, we’re hoping to capitalize on that in terms of the bridge replacement.”

Johnny Casey is the Madison County communities reporter for The News-Record & Sentinel, part of the USA TODAY Network. Reach him at jcasey@newsrecordandsentinel.com.

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