

tips & quips  
about our  
environment  
and its  
inhabitants



## NATURE'S reflections

### OSCEOLA WILD TURKEY

*Found only on the peninsula of Florida*

The Florida wild turkey, called Osceola (*Meleagris gallopavo osceola*), was first described as a subspecies in 1890 and named for the famous Seminole Chief Osceola. The Osceola prefers wild, wet terrains from flat pine woods, oak and palmetto hammocks to deep swamp habitats.

Adult birds have long reddish-yellow to greyish-green legs and a dark body. Each foot has three toes, and males have a spur behind each of their lower legs. The white bars in the wing feathers are narrow, irregular, broken and do not extend all the way to the shaft. Although dark, in the sunlight feathers shine with iridescent greens, reds and some bronze colors. Males have a large, featherless, head (with fleshy growths called caruncles), throat, and red wattles on the throat and neck. When males are excited the entire head and neck area engorge with blood turning from grey to red within moments as the color rises indicating excitement or irritation. Beards can grow to ten inches or more.

Males often strut, fluffing body feathers and fanning their long, dark, tail feathers to appear larger and more fierce as a warning to other males and to impress females. A mature tom turkey weighs only about eighteen pounds in his peak breeding state but has longer spurs on average than other subspecies.

Typically in April a nest of twigs is built on the ground where an average clutch of ten eggs are laid over a couple of weeks. Following twenty-five days of incubation the eggs hatch. Poults roost on the ground for the first two weeks. Only half of the nests successfully hatch and hens may re-nest if the initial nest is destroyed. Of those that hatch, another seventy percent are lost to predators like raccoons, striped, and spotted skunks, opossums, gray foxes and coyotes.

To grow, poults need an abundant habitat that provides seeds, insects, and succulent growth for the young birds, yet habitat dense enough to provide cover from predators. Diseases are minimal. Osceolas are gregarious, social animals and exhibit flocking behavior regardless of density. The population replaces itself every three or four years. Since turkeys are not known to over-populate, they do not damage their habitat. 🍀

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