MOUNTAINS

Learn something from the wild turkey

Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

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

If you traveled around in Western North Carolina or East Tennessee to visit friends or family and eat turkey for the Thanksgiving holiday, there is a high likelihood you passed a rafter of wild turkeys along the way. Though a group of them can also be called a flock, the term "rafter" is also correct and was adapted because when buildings were being constructed, turkeys often would be found perching in the rafters.

Although sometimes we humans may call one another "turkey" as a comical insult, our species can actually learn a lot from Meleagris gallopavo. Turkeys are efficient communicators, they have a strong family or "clan" mentality, and they are superb collaborators.

Turkeys evolved more than 11 million years ago and are related to other game birds like pheasants, quail, grouse and partridges. There are five subspecies of turkeys, each differing in plumage and range. They have keen eyesight, are born with innate knowledge of predators and landscape, and are talkative, gregarious animals.

"Turkeys communicate in various ways, from vocalizations to appearance," says Michael J. Chamberlain, a professor of Wildlife Ecology with the University of Georgia. "It is believed that turkeys primarily recognize each other through these vocalizations and the appearance of their heads."

Chamberlain studies the behavior of wild turkeys all over the southeastern United States. Of particular interest to him are the social hierarchies that influence how individual turkeys behave throughout their lives.

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

Pecking orders begin to form when birds are only a few days old. Groups of males and females each have pecking orders where there is a dominant bird within the group and other birds are subordinate.

"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 says. "These pecking orders dictate access to resources and breeding opportunities in the spring."

Back when European settlers first came to Southern Appalachia, wild turkeys were plentiful. By the early 1900s, however, only a few were left, a decline that continued into the mid-century due to unregulated and heavy market hunting, rapid deforestation, and habitat destruction.

Thanks to an innovative trap known as a rocket net, biologists in the 1950s began to capture surviving individuals in various places and relocate them to suitable habitats from which the bird had previously disappeared. These relocation efforts continue today, with birds still being moved to areas of east Texas where populations have not done well.

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," says 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."

An estimated 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 says, "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 form 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' success is linked to areas with abundant grasses and shrubby vegetation that grow 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 black bears who share their requirement for hard mast like acorns in the winter. So, managing parks and forest lands to ensure turkeys can thrive should mean success for many other important species.

If you enjoy watching turkeys and learning about their behavior, check out "My Life as a Turkey" by Joe Hutto on YouTube.

Frances Figart is the editor of "Smokies Life" magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Paul Holland, Bob Bleeker, Joe McLeod and Bobby Warren enjoy cocktails at the bar at the Lobster House in Fayetteville on Aug. 2, 1979.
JOHNNY HORNE/THE FAYETTEVILLE OBSERVER FILE

Why is there no happy hour in North Carolina?

N.C. Answers
Brian Gordon
USA Today Network

Question: Why can't North Carolina restaurants host happy hours?

Short Answer: Concerns over drunk driving led North Carolina to ban limited drink specials in the 1980s, and the state is now one of only eight to prohibit happy hours.

Though some would surely like to grab a discounted beer (or beers) at certain times of the day, representatives of the state's food and beverage industry say getting back happy hour isn't currently a top priority.

Longer Answer: Alcoholic drinks can't be sold at free or reduced prices in North Carolina for limited hours. A bar can sell drinks at a discounted rate for an entire day, but not less. Businesses also can't offer discounts for only certain customers (so no ladies' nights, college nights, annoyed journalists' nights, etc.).

Happy hours did have a heyday in the Tar Heel State, albeit a brief one. The concept gained popularity in the late 1970s once North Carolina began allowing bars and restaurants to serve individual liquor drinks. Newspapers wrote about the new drink deal trend with quotes: "happy hours".

However in 1985, a year after the National Minimum Drinking Age Act raised the drinking age to 21, North Carolina legislators were vocally opposing the practice.

"We're glamorizing and promoting it as if it's lemonade," Rep. Coy Privette (R-Cabarrus) said at the time.

Privette was a Baptist pastor, Christian activist and a teetotaler (he'd later be charged with multiple counts of aiding and abetting prostitution, but that's another matter). He believed happy hours contributed to drunk driving, a worry shared by many of his colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

"I think happy hours encourage consumption at the wrong times, when people are tired and are on their way home," said Rep. Martin Lancaster, a Democrat who would later serve in Congress and the Clinton Administration. Lancaster introduced a bill to eliminate limited drink specials.

But before the General Assembly could pass a bill, the North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Commission beat them to it: putting a happy hour ban into effect in August 1985. The ABC Commission is a state agency that controls how all alcoholic beverages in North Carolina are made, transported and sold.

Today, North Carolina is one of eight states without happy hours. The others — Massachusetts, Indiana, Alaska, Rhode Island, Vermont, Utah, and Oklahoma — are geographically and politically diverse.

As for whether happy hours will make a resurgence, the topic is down on the list of changes business owners have wanted to see, said Lynn Minges, president of the North Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association (NCRLA)

"There have been so many other more pressing issues that have demanded our attention and we've chosen to focus on those," she said.

A few years ago, the NCRLA successfully lobbied for a brunch bill that allowed alcohol to be sold on Sundays as early as 10 a.m. Alcohol sales had previously been prohibited before noon on Sundays.

More recently, the association has pushed to create more social districts, extend alcohol service in outdoor dining settings, and allow restaurants to order liquor from ABC stores online.

North Carolina is also currently facing a widespread liquor shortage, a problem that prompted the head of the ABC Commission to resign earlier this year.

So, happy hours may not be top-of-mind at the moment. Some restaurant owners, Minges pointed out, may like not feeling the competitive pressures to offer limited drink specials. "Given the situation they've all struggled through during COVID, (happy hour) is probably not something that they are eager to do right now," she said.

Austin Jordan, general manager at the Jack of the Wood pub in Asheville, said the lack of happy hours hasn't hampered sales. He offered afternoon specials when working at a bar in Virginia and noted these discounts did draw in the after-work crowd. But he said his current bar gets by just fine doing select drink specials — dollar off bourbons, $7 Moscow Mules — that (by law) run all day.

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