

Talking Turkey



Life Skill: Communication

Project Skill: Learning about wild turkey calls or vocalizations

Objective: Recognize and record wild turkey vocalizations; then give an oral presentation discussing how turkeys communicate

Success Indicator: Participants recognize and demonstrate wild turkey calls

Provisions Needed

- Commercial or homemade turkey calls
- Commercial audio-tapes of turkey calls (optional)*
- Portable audio-cassette recorder
- Blank tape
- Camouflage clothing

* Real Turkeys, P.O. Box 337, Suwannee, Fla. 32692, is one source



Trailhead

It's no secret that wild turkeys gobble. But did you know turkeys also yelp, cackle, and purr? Just like people, wild turkeys communicate with one another. With a little observation and practice, you too can learn to translate and "talk turkey." Although wild

gobbles

turkeys nearly faced extinction in the early 1900s, conservation efforts and wise management have helped them increase to record numbers today. **If you live in the South, there are wild turkeys within an hour's drive of your home (probably closer).**

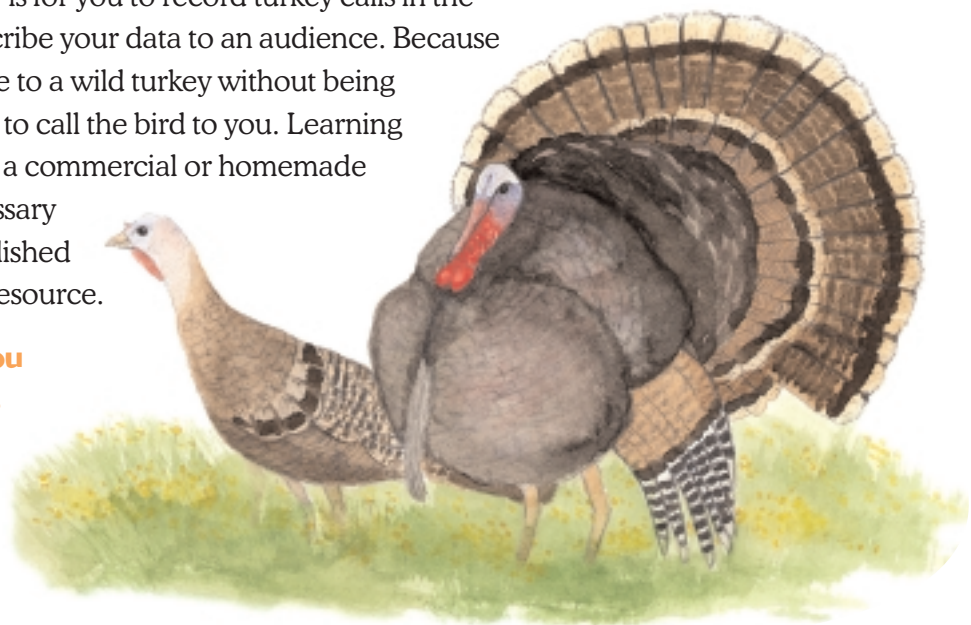


Trailblazing

The goal of this activity is for you to record turkey calls in the wild and to interpret and describe your data to an audience. Because it is very difficult to sneak close to a wild turkey without being detected, it may be necessary to call the bird to you. Learning to mimic their calls—by using a commercial or homemade caller—may be another necessary preparatory step. An accomplished turkey hunter is an excellent resource.

To begin your fieldwork, you must find and gain access to an area populated by wild turkeys.

kee-kee



cluck



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Talking Turkey

putt

Your 4-H helper should be able to help you locate such an area and get permission to visit. **You can hear wild turkeys year-round, but the male gobblers or talks almost exclusively during spring mating season.** Since this may coincide with local hunting seasons, it is important to know when the season is open and to make sure, for safety's sake, that you are not calling turkeys in the same area with hunters. Some states also have fall hunting seasons.

Start with a scouting mission—take a walk through the woods and fields and look for signs of wild turkeys (see Field Guide below for helpful information). After you find an area frequented by wild turkeys, put on your camouflage gear, gather your recording equipment, and head for the woods. It is best to arrive just before daylight because the morning vocalizations made by turkeys on the roost will help you locate your quarry. **Once your fieldwork is done, share your findings and newly developed skills in a presentation to your 4-H club or another group.**

fftt-dummmm



Field Guide

■ As turkeys search for **acorns and other small seeds**, they scratch with their feet, leaving bare spots on the forest floor next to small leaf piles. Tracks are most obvious where the soil is exposed, particularly in muddy and sandy spots. You can tell the sex of a turkey by inspecting its droppings. Droppings of males tend to be 'J'-shaped, while those of females are corkscrew-shaped.

■ The wild turkey is the **largest game bird** in North America. Adult gobblers weigh approximately 20 pounds and are about 40 inches tall; adult hens average 10 pounds and stand about 30 inches tall.

■ The male's head is striking, displaying red, white, and blue at different times. The hen's head is dull-colored, often bluish, with small feathers reaching up the back of the neck to the base of the head. The plumage of wild turkeys is **iridescent** bronze. Males are much darker, having shiny, black-tipped body feathers; females have drab, buff-tipped body feathers. The presence of a **beard** and **spurs** usually indicates a male. The beard looks like a tuft of stiff bristles or hairs sticking out of the bird's chest. Spurs are bony structures located on the inside of the gobbler's leg and may be very sharp, particularly on older males.

purrr



Talking Turkey

yelp

■ Wild turkeys communicate using several different **vocalizations**. The following table (adapted from *The Book of the Wild Turkey* by Lovett E. Williams, Jr., 1981, Winchester Press: Tulsa, Okla.) lists the most commonly heard calls and provides a clue as to what a turkey might

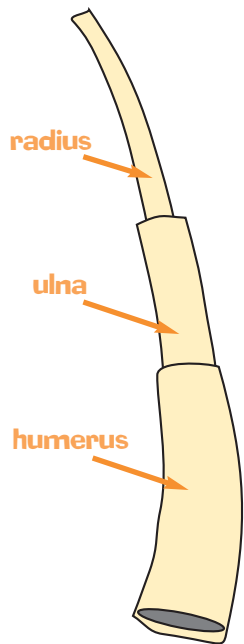
be trying to communicate when using them. **An audiocassette of wild turkey calls also is a good resource to help you study this new “language.”**

cackle

Noise	Description	Meaning to Turkey Calling	Meaning to Turkey Hearing
Gobble	Sounded by male from roost tree in morning, as he flies down, and while strutting.	“I’m an adult male; hens come to me; other gobblers beware.” (Male tries to attract hens and drive away other males.)	Hen: “Oh, there is my man.” Other male: “I better stay away from him.” Or “He thinks he’s boss—I’ll show him.” (Hens may yelp; other males may gobble.)
Drumming	<i>Fft-dummmm</i> sound made as gobbler struts; comes from inside the bird.	“Here I am; I’m ready to mate.”	“Oh, there you are, handsome.”
Tree yelp	Most familiar call of the hen; also made by males; soft, morning roost call.	“Is everybody still here?” (Looking for reassurance.)	“The flock is still here.” (Might yelp back.)
Plain yelp	Longer and louder than tree yelp; used primarily in feeding when visual contact is lost.	“I’m still here; are you still there?” (Looking for reassurance.)	“I hear another turkey.” (Hen might yelp back; gobbler might gobble.)
Lost yelp	Similar to plain yelp but louder and longer with a sense of urgency.	“I’m lost; where are y’all?” (Wants to join rest of flock.)	“I hear one of my flock.” (Usually yelps back.)
Kee-kee	The “lost” call of young turkeys; it is called the <i>kee-kee</i> run when combined with the adult lost call at beginning and/or end.	“I’m young and I’m lost.” (Wants to rejoin flock, especially its mother.)	“A young turkey is lost.” (Usually yelps back—especially another lost turkey.)
Cluck	Soft, but can become loud and intense (called “cutting”) when turkey is excited.	“I’m a turkey, and I’m right here.” (Announces presence.)	“I hear another turkey.” (Sometimes clucks back.)
Putt	Short, sharp cluck.	“Something is wrong!” (Alarmed.)	“Something must be wrong.” (Also alarmed; may putt also.)
Cackle	Loud, excited clucks in rapid succession; may be followed by a few yelps.	“I’m flying down; come with me.” (Ready to begin the day.)	“I hear someone flying down.” (May also fly down soon.)
Purr	Soft sound audible only a few feet away.	“Everything seems to be just fine.” (Announces contentment.)	“Everything must be OK over there.” (May purr also.)

Talking Turkey

homemade wingbone call



The Extra Mile

Though many commercial turkey calls are sold in stores, the sound from a homemade **wingbone** call can't be beat. Native Americans have used these calls for thousands of years. You can make one out of the three bones from a single turkey wing. Cut both ends off all three bones and clean them inside and out. Using epoxy, glue the large end of the radius bone into the small end of the ulna. Then, glue the large end of the ulna bone in the small end of the humerus. To make a sound, suck on the small end of the new call. You can alter the tone by trimming the larger end of the call, or by varying how tightly your lips grasp the call. You can also vary the amount of air you draw through the call. Try placing the call in your mouth in different ways. This device may be tough to master, but the sound is among the most realistic. See these sites for tips on how to make your call.

Internet Resources

- <http://www.jesseshuntingpage.com/wingbone-call.html>
- <http://hometown.aol.com/wingbonecall/Wingbone.html>



Field Notes

share

- How many different vocalizations were you able to detect and record? What were they?
- What other animal calls and sounds did you hear while in the field?
- What challenges did you experience trying to record field calls?
- What was the best time to hear wild turkeys calling?
- What calls could you identify by sound alone? Did you need to see the bird to determine male and female calls?

process

- Why is communication important to wild turkeys?
- How did you interpret turkey sounds that were unfamiliar to you? What clues did you observe from their behavior while making the calls?
- How did you decide how to organize and present your material?

generalize

- In what ways is communication important in your life?

apply

- How can you use your new skills to help you communicate better one-on-one? With a group?