Wild Turkey *Meleagris gallopavo*

Though native to North America, the Wild Turkey is not native to California. Early efforts to introduce the species to San Diego County failed, then in 1993 another attempt took root. By 2002 the birds had spread from two points of release in central San Diego County north to the Riverside County line and south to within ten miles of the Mexican border. The name "Wild" Turkey is a misnomer as far as San Diego County is concerned; far from remaining in wild areas where they would offer real sport to hunters, the birds accumulate in parks and around human settlements where they can't be hunted—domesticating themselves.

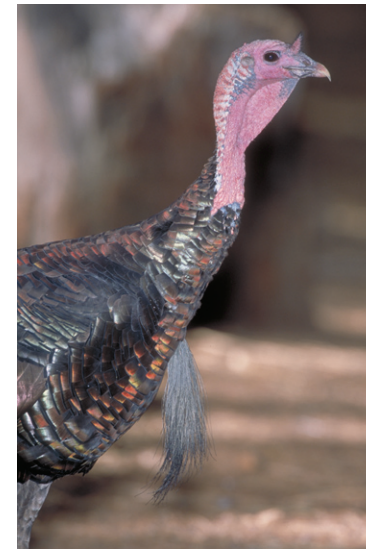
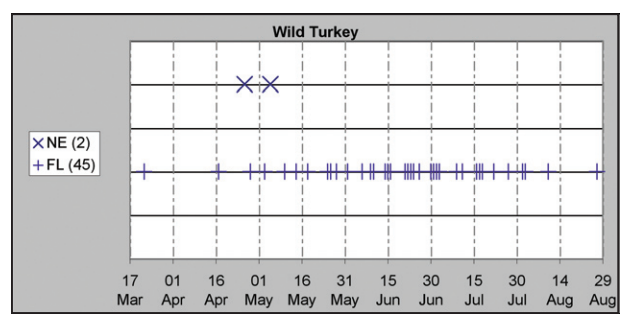


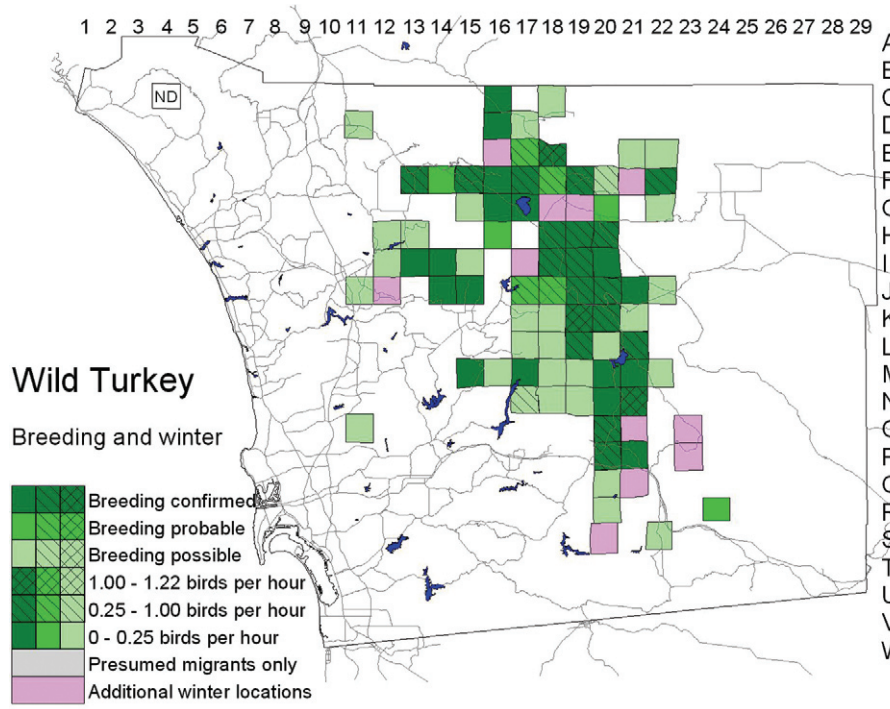
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Breeding distribution: From January to March 1993, the California Department of Fish and Game released 234 turkeys on private ranches near Sutherland Lake (J18) and at Pine Hills (K19). From these sites, the birds spread over most of the oak woodland of central San Diego County. They had begun nesting by 1997 and probably earlier. By 1999 the county population was estimated at 1500. During the breeding season our counts ran as high as 25 in La Jolla Indian Reservation (F15) 17 May 2000 (S. Berg), 25 in Cañada Verde, Los Coyotes Indian Reservation (F20), 12 May 2001 (D. W. Au, K. J. Winter), 25 in the Edwards Ranch northeast of Santa Ysabel (I19) 16 March 2001 (D. W. Au), and 30 north of Julian (J20) 26 June 2001 (O. Carter). Most of the birds have remained in the mountains and foothills, but a few have spread down to the coastal lowland, where noted west to Wilderness Gardens (D11; one on 6 April and 18 May 2000, V. Dineen), Escondido (J11; up to two on 27 June 1998, W. Pray), and upper San Clemente Canyon, Air Station Miramar (O11; one on 18 May 2000, G. L. Rogers). During the atlas period turkeys spread east toward the desert as far as Scissors Crossing (J22; one on 17 March 2001, R. Thériault), and afterward even farther, far outside suitable habitat: up to 11 at the north end of the Borrego Valley (E24) 13 May 2002, four in the Ram's Hill development of Borrego Springs (H25) 7 April 2002, and two at Tamarisk Grove (I24) 4–11 April 2002 (M. C. Jorgensen, P. D. Jorgensen).

Nesting: Turkeys nest in a scrape on the ground. Our two dates of nests with eggs are 26 April and 5 May. On the latter date, the incubating hen was found killed by a bobcat, as attested by tracks around the nest (R. Botta). Our



observations of turkey chicks, however, show the species has a long breeding season in San Diego County. The earliest date for chicks, 22 March 1998 in upper San Felipe Valley (H20; A. P. and T. E. Keenan), means that incubation of the clutch began by 22 February in this wet year. Otherwise our earliest date for chicks is 17 April 1999. Several records of chicks extend into August; the latest was of young only one quarter grown near Descanso (P20) 27 August 1998 (D. W. Povey).



Migration: The turkey is nonmigratory but capable of dispersing considerable distances over a short time, as the birds' spread demonstrates. One bird fitted with a radio transmitter and released near Sutherland Lake moved 12 miles north, as far as the west fork of the San Luis Rey River (R. Botta).

Winter: We encountered turkeys in winter in flocks even larger than during the breeding season, up to 75 in the Edwards Ranch 8 January 2000 (D. W. Au).

Conservation: The turkey was first introduced into San Diego County on Palomar Mountain in 1931, but that attempt, using domestic birds from a game farm, failed. Another introduction, in 1959 of 57 turkeys from the King Ranch, southern Texas, released at Corte Madera Ranch, resulted in numbers estimated at 200–300 by 1965. After San Diego County's second-biggest recorded fire, the Laguna fire of October 1970, the population was much reduced, never recovered, and apparently died out by 1985 (Calif. Dept. Fish and Game 1995). Releases in Camp Pendleton in 1978 and on Palomar Mountain in 1990 were likewise unsuccessful.

The more ambitious introduction in 1993 was controversial from the beginning, promoted by hunting interests, opposed by the California Native Plant Society, Save our Forests and Ranchlands, California State Parks, and some private landowners. A lawsuit brought by the first two organizations blocked further releases beyond those in 1993, but the initial introduction proved sufficient to populate much of the county. Much of the better turkey habitat, oak woodland with broken shrubby understory, is on private property and in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park where hunting is prohibited. Comparatively little good habitat is in the chaparral-dominated lands of the Cleveland National Forest, where hunting is permitted. On one of our field trips to cover north-central San Diego County, 1 May 1999, we encountered turkey hunters searching in vain for the birds in Blue Canyon (E17), within the national forest. The same day, we encountered the turkeys themselves just 2 miles away at Puerta La Cruz Conservation Camp (E18), where they walk around the prison grounds with no regard for people. Concern has been expressed over the turkeys' possibly depleting the food supply (especially acorns) on which native wildlife relies, their preying on rare reptiles and amphibians, and over their possibly degrading the habitat of certain rare plants. California State Parks have as their goal conserving native wildlife and preventing the spread of exotic organisms, so the California Department of Fish and Game, at the instigation of park authorities, has trapped and removed over 160 turkeys from Cuyamaca Rancho State Park since 1995. The park had become one of the sites of greatest turkey concentration in San Diego County, but in spite of the trapping the numbers both inside and outside the park continue to increase. Similarly, the U.S. Forest Service expressed concern over the likelihood that the turkeys would spread into designated wilderness areas, where introductions of nonnative plants and animals are forbidden.

One argument in the debate was that the turkey is not a truly exotic species in California because it is known here from Pleistocene fossil remains. The fossil species, *Meleagris anza* Howard, 1963, and *M. californica* (Miller, 1909), however, are not the same as the extant *M. gallopavo*. *Meleagris anza*, found in the Carrizo Badlands, dates from the early Pleistocene when the environment was far different from today's.

Taxonomy: The turkeys released in San Diego County in 1993, of intermediates between *M. p. intermedia* Sennett, 1879, and *M. p. gallopavo* Vieillot, 1817, were trapped in the wild in eastern Texas (J. Massie, California Department of Fish and Game).