

It seems as if everyone who comes to Hagerman NWR hopes to catch sight of our National Bird, the Bald Eagle, but what about the bird it is said Ben Franklin wanted chosen as our nation's symbol: the Wild Turkey? The Rio Grande subspecies of Wild Turkey are primarily found in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico. These large birds seek out areas with lots of edge habitat, and roost nightly in mature hardwoods, including hackberry, pecan, elm, and cottonwood. Sounds like the refuge has plenty of perfect habitat for them, doesn't it? With spring mating season right around the corner, you might catch sight of a flock of turkeys as you approach the refuge, or along one of the trails. In fact, Refuge Manager Kathy Whaley wrote about just such an encounter in a blog posted right before Thanksgiving in 2009. I hope you enjoy revisiting it below, and maybe on your next visit, you'll find some Wild Turkeys yourself.



Photo by Jack Chiles

*Reprinted from Hagerman NWR Blog, Tuesday, November 24, 2009*

### **Let's Talk Turkey By Kathy Whaley**

One rainy morning last spring on my way to work I suddenly found myself slamming on the brakes. There, out of the wet, misty brush, came one, then two, then three, four, five, six...in all 52 wild turkeys strutting their way across the road in front of me. Mouth dropped and eyes widened, I could only stare. I had never seen this many turkeys at once!

This was one of the many flocks of Rio Grande wild turkeys (named for the general area in which they are found—the central plains states) we now have at Hagerman Refuge. But, this has not always been the case. By the late 1800's, turkeys throughout Texas had been hunted to very low numbers. Since



Photo by Brenda Loveless

then, hunting regulations and better habitat management practices have allowed turkey populations to steadily increase in most areas. Several flocks of 100+ turkeys use habitat on and adjacent to the Refuge including brushy areas next to streams and the lake, or mixed oak forests near the creeks. At Hagerman, turkeys are sometimes visible along field edges or roadsides with trees and like to forage for insects and seeds in wooded areas.

Female turkeys weigh about 10 pounds while males tip the scales at closer to 20. Their iridescent feathers have a green-copper sheen to them with the tips of the tail and lower back feathers being light tan. Male turkeys are known for their "beards" which are actually bristly tassels rather than feathers and grow for life instead of molting. Wild turkeys prefer to nest in grass or brush at least 18 inches tall and

usually lay 10-11 eggs that hatch in 28 days. Young turkeys (poults) are up and running behind the hen within the first 24 hours. Being generally ground dwellers, there is a high mortality rate on poults by critters including bobcats, foxes, snakes, raccoons, and hogs. Safe night roosting sites are critical to turkey survival. They typically seek trees that are 40 feet or taller and tend to roost in groups.

Although you can see turkeys any time of year, spring is an especially fun time to look for these unique birds. Males can often be seen strutting around and fanning their tail feathers in hopes of impressing the ladies. When you visit Hagerman Refuge, keep an eye out for signs of wild turkeys by looking for scratching in the dirt or leaves, spotting their large three-toed foot print, or listen for gobbling sounds coming from the woods.



Photo by Jack Chiles