



LEONARD LEE RUE III

Wild turkeys and golf courses are a natural combination.

ON COURSE WITH NATURE

Of Eagles, Birdies, and Turkeys

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FOR A GOLFER, there is no doubt that eagles and birdies rank high on the list of satisfying experiences. But what about the turkeys? Wild turkeys on golf courses? It's a *natural* combination. The wild turkey, an insect- and seed-eating bird, is found throughout the United States and northern Mexico, and is one of the largest birds in North America. Besides Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner, what do you know about turkeys?

An average adult male (called a tom or gobbler) can grow up to four feet long and weigh 18 pounds. The average female (hen) is much smaller, weighing only about nine pounds. Anatomical features are more prominent on the male turkey than on females. During the spring breeding season, the caruncles (wartlike growths on the neck) and the wattles (folds of skin below the beak) can turn fiery red, white, or blue, depending on the bird's mood. The snood is a flap of skin hanging down from the tom's beak. To help get the attention of a hen, the gobbler's snood will grow from about one inch to five inches! The beard is simply a bundle of special long, thin feathers.

For the tom, all of these features are designed to prove to a female that he is a worthy mate.

Wild turkeys like company. Flocks of eight to ten turkeys form in the fall and winter. Generally, adult hens and their young of the year stay in one flock, while males come together to form "bachelor flocks." As spring approaches, the flocks break down and all of the groups join in large courtship flocks. They will stay together for about two to three weeks, when the hens move off to search for nest sites, followed by one or more adult gobblers. Mating takes place at this time. After mating, the males rejoin the male-only flocks until the following spring. Females then prepare their nests and take on all responsibilities for raising the poults (young turkeys).

Wild turkeys need diverse habitats that vary seasonally. They tend to be *habitat generalists* — using several different kinds of plant communities during the year. During the winter, turkeys need high-energy foods. Acorns, beechnuts, and pine seeds are preferred, but under harsh winter conditions, waste grain will do. As spring arrives, wild

turkeys move from their winter habitat to areas that are better suited to provide nesting and brood-rearing habitats. These habitats are often on the edges of hay fields, old logging roads, fairways on golf courses, and thinned-out woodlots. For short distances, wild turkeys are strong flyers. However, they spend more time walking. For short sprints, they can reach running speeds of up to 18 miles per hour.

Proper management of your course, woodlot, and grass areas can provide excellent habitat for these magnificent creatures. Because they're insect eaters and will consume seeds from invasive vegetation, they're great for your course's IPM program. They tend to be wary of people, so although you may see them from a distance or in transit from wooded area to wooded area, they tend not to be intrusive.

While you're out with your next foursome and you happen to spot a turkey, use this opportunity to show off your golf course wildlife expertise. It may be almost as much fun as birdies and eagles to challenge them to describe a snood, wattle, or caruncle!