

What Do Wild Turkeys Eat?

Discover the Diet of a Wild Turkey

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Updated 03/05/20



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Turkeys are common guests on the dinner table, particularly for holiday meals such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, but what would wild turkeys eat if they could plan the menu? Learning about turkeys' preferred foods can help birders better understand these birds' [foraging habits](#) and where to find turkeys throughout the year when different food sources are available.

Foods They Eat

Wild turkeys are opportunistically [omnivorous](#), which means they will readily sample a wide range of foods, both animal and vegetable. They forage frequently and will eat many different things, including:

Acorns, hickory nuts, beechnuts, or walnuts, either cracked open or swallowed whole

Seeds and grain, including spilled birdseed or corn and wheat in agricultural fields

Berries, wild grapes, crabapples, and [other small fruits](#)

Small reptiles including lizards and snakes

Fleshy plant parts such as buds, roots, bulbs, succulents, and cacti

Plant foliage, grass, and tender young leaves or shoots

Large insects including grasshoppers, spiders, and caterpillars

Snails, slugs, and worms

Sand and small gravel for grit to aid proper digestion

In captivity or in agricultural settings, domestic turkeys—which are the same genetic species as wild turkeys—are often fed a special commercial feed formulated for game birds, turkeys, or poultry. These commercial feeds typically contain a mix of material to simulate these birds' highly varied diets. Many turkey farmers also supplement their flock's feeding with additional corn, grain,

or other foods. The diet of domestic turkeys is often formulated to encourage heavier birds and faster growth to increase commercial profits. Some farmers, however, focus on heritage turkey breeds and offer a more [natural diet](#) for the birds to eat, including allowing them to forage freely through pastures and fields.



Illustration: The Spruce/Jerry Lue

How They Eat

Wild turkeys forage constantly, always seeking out a new meal or snack. They are most frequently found feeding for several hours in the early morning just after sunrise, and will also feed more actively several hours before darkness. If food is scarce they will forage at any time of day, and when the flock includes young, hungry chicks, they are more often foraging throughout the day as well.

While foraging, a wild turkey will scratch with both feet, alternating to use each foot one at a time, then pecking at the ground to find whatever has been uncovered. They will occasionally pluck fruit or other foods directly off plants, but only rarely forage while perched in trees. A turkey swallows its food whole and the material is stored in the bird's crop to be digested little by little with the help of the gizzard. After feeding, turkeys will often roost quietly for several hours while they digest.

How Their Diet Varies

Though turkeys will eat many different things, their diets can be influenced by a number of factors, such as:

Season: Turkeys, like all animals, select food sources that are most abundant and easiest to reach. When different foods are abundant in different seasons, turkeys adjust their diets accordingly. In spring, they eat more fresh buds, grasses, and similar plant material, while insects and berries are more popular fare in summer. In autumn and winter, nuts, fruits, and grains make up the bulk of a wild turkey's diet.

Geography: A bird's location greatly influences the foods it can find. Wild turkeys that are found in more forested ranges will have a higher percentage of nuts and buds in their diet. Turkeys that are in more open, desert regions may rely on more reptiles, seeds, and cacti for their nutrition. In agricultural regions, wild turkeys can often find much more grain to eat, and may even be considered a nuisance or pest in farmers' fields.

Age: Young wild turkeys can forage for themselves very quickly, and the hen will lead her brood to the best available food sources. For the first month of the birds' lives, they eat a much higher percentage of insects, mollusks, reptiles, or other meat to get the protein essential for healthy growth. As they age they try a wider variety of foods and transition to a more varied diet depending on what is available. Adult wild turkeys eat mostly plant matter but still take advantage of any easily available food, including meat.

[Up-Close Photos of Wild Turkeys Like You've Never Seen](#)

Feeding Turkeys

Wild turkeys are not common as backyard birds, but birders who live near wooded areas may find these large game birds foraging near their feeders. To provide an adequate feeding area for wild turkeys:

Opt for [ground feeding areas](#) or large, low platform feeders that can accommodate these large birds and the flocks they forage in. Turkey scratching can damage turf or delicate

landscaped beds, however, so plan a feeding area in a spot you don't mind getting torn up or trampled.

Provide [cracked corn](#), millet, milo, wheat, oats, or other seeds and grains. Wild turkeys are not picky and will readily eat less expensive birdseed mixes or will eat the waste seed scattered beneath bird feeders. Leave leaf litter available for the birds to forage, and leave windfall fruit and nuts on the ground for turkeys to find.

Plant oak or beech trees along with grapes, cherry trees, crabapples, hackberries, and similar trees and shrubs to provide an inexpensive, natural, renewable food source for wild turkeys. Native plants are best because the turkeys will recognize them more easily, and the plants will require less care to produce abundant crops to feed a hungry flock.

Minimize or eliminate herbicides and insecticides that could contaminate foods wild turkeys eat, particularly during the summer when young birds are more susceptible to toxic chemicals. Instead, allow turkeys to forage freely and they will eat many bothersome insects.

Wild turkeys are large game birds with healthy appetites, and they sate those appetites with a wide variety of different foods. Birders who know what wild turkeys eat can more easily plan how to find these game birds in the field by visiting areas where food is abundant. It is even possible to [provide a spot for wild turkeys](#) at a backyard bird-friendly buffet instead of focusing on these birds at the center of a holiday dinner table.