

NOTES ON THE WILD TURKEY IN INDIANA

BY S. E. PERKINS III

Thanksgiving time is approaching. It usually brings to mind the subject of turkey, so it has occurred to me that it might be of some interest to record the observations of travelers in Indiana in earlier days on the status of the Wild Turkey. This bird was a more highly colored one than the farm yard variety, with much more of the bronze and copper reflections in its plumage. It fed largely on nuts and wild fruits and its flesh was tender and delicious.

I naturally turn to reports of travelers in the pocket of the State. Vincennes, located there, was the earliest outpost in lower Indiana, variously reported as having been founded in 1702 and 1735. During the period from 1765 until almost the middle of the next century it was the objective of many native and foreign travelers, most of whom were in search of scientific data.

Then, too, Harmony, later New Harmony, fifty miles farther down the Wabash River, established in 1815 by the Rappites, who were succeeded in 1825 by Robert Dale Owen and his Communistic band, was the terminus for journeys of many and the temporary abode of other travelers going farther west, for more than twenty years. The members of the famous Boatload of Knowledge lived there. Among the scientists known in this country and abroad, who gathered at New Harmony, were Thomas Say, naturalist and conchologist; Chas. A. Sueur, artist, an intimate friend of the noted ornithologist, Cuvier; Constantine Rafinesque, botanist; and Dr. Girard Troost. It was to be expected that the most frequent reports of observations of scientific and popular facts would pertain to that part of Indiana. There are many records thoroughly reliable and by men accustomed to writing of their observations.

Col. Geo. R. Croghen, in June, 1765, with a small party crossed from Cincinnati to Vincennes (called by him Port Vincent) on a mission to distribute gifts for the Government to the Indian tribes. He reports, "the ground near here (Port Vincent) is well watered and full of buffalo, deer, bears and all kinds of wild game."

John J. Audubon, the celebrated bird painter, lived at Henderson, Kentucky, opposite Evansville, from 1810 for the period of eight years. He left a diary of his doings. His notes are to the effect that the Wild Turkey was exceedingly abundant in that part of Southern Indiana where he collected.

Then came in 1816, David Thomas, a florist and pomologist, who had few equals along these lines in the United States at that time, on

a visit to lower Indiana, who says, "wild turkeys abound in this country".

Wm. Corbett, an English soldier, spent some time in Indiana, especially at Princeton, Evansville, and Harmony in 1818, and has left us in his diary the following sentences: "Saw on June 23, 1818, large quantities of wild turkeys and thousands of passenger pigeons." Again, "On our way to Princeton we saw large flocks of fine wild turkeys and whole herds of pigs, apparently very fat. Some of the inhabitants, who prefer sport to work, live by shooting these wild turkeys."

Three years later David B. Warden, French-Irish author and antiquarian, says "of the feathered race of game, wild turkeys and pigeons swarmed in the woods".

Wm. N. Blaney reports during 1822 that "two young hunters in two days' hunt in southern Indiana brought back a great number of turkeys, 16 deer and 2 bears".

Timothy Flint, in his "History of the Mississippi Valley", records that in 1826 he found Wild Turkeys and pigeons numerous throughout southern Indiana.

Maximilian, Prince of Wied, made extensive travels through North America and prepared several volumes of the scientific data acquired. He spent the winter of 1832-1833 at New Harmony and the vicinity where he writes as follows: "The most interesting of the birds of this part is the wild turkey which was formerly extremely numerous and is still pretty common". "A large cock was sold at Harmony for a quarter of a dollar. A young man in the neighborhood who supplied the place with this delicate game, had often 10 or 15 hanging about his horse at the same time". "In our excursions we often visited some others of the numerous islands in the Wabash, being particularly attracted there by the loud cries of the wild turkey". "Turkey Island seemed to be a favorite place of resort where we often found wild turkeys and even the Virginian deer and it is really a fine sight to see flocks of these wild turkeys flying across the river". "We generally return home with ducks and other birds but we are unsuccessful in our chase of the wild turkeys, of which we sometimes saw whole flocks flying across the Wabash". This is the first reference to the growing scarcity of this noble bird. Note that from "extremely numerous" this bird has been reduced by 1832 to "pretty common".

Dr. E. W. Nelson of the Biological Survey, from his study of the birds of this region, in 1875 found the Wild Turkey common in the bottoms.

Dr. A. W. Brayton of Indianapolis, reports the last one found within Marion County was in 1879.

Robert Ridgway, writing of the Wild Turkey near Wheaton, Knox County, in 1881, says of it in that limited area, "Common, scarcely a day but what one or more were seen and on one occasion a flock of 14 was met with. When surprised they fly into the swamp, where, alighting on the trees, they are secure from pursuit. The inhabitants pay no attention whatever to the game laws, and it is owing entirely to the safe retreat afforded by the swamp that the turkeys have not been more nearly exterminated". In the 80's then, the bird is not found except in the bottoms and swamps, the places of most difficult access for hunters.

Mr. James P. Baker of Indianapolis, recalls that as the turkeys became scarcer they roosted higher, even to the highest branches of trees.

Its status in the late 80's was such that, as a species, it could have been increased. However, there was still that feeling among farmers that everything wild belonged solely to the local owners and any attempt to legislate and enforce legislation for the benefit of the State was an infringement on purely personal rights and little progress for protection to our vanishing wild life was accomplished.

Dr. Amos W. Butler gives as the last dates of these birds reported to him, from Knox County, 1894; from Gibson County, 1897, at which dates they were to be found only in limited numbers in Posey County, their last stand, the corner County of the State. Since the 90's they have gradually become scarcer and scarcer until now they are pretty generally considered to be entirely extinct within our borders, except for the nucleus recently released on the Brown County Reservation by the State Conservation Department and the few in privately owned game farms.

Thirty-eight young birds, raised from wild North Dakota stock, in captivity, have been released during the last two seasons. What a pity that we are having to introduce to our State a species of bird which, if conservative methods for its use had been adhered to in the past quarter century, we would have obviated the necessity for steps to be taken for its re-introduction. This should be a lesson to us as we think on other species whose future existence is in the balance.

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