

The unique features of this wildly popular game bird make identification afield easy. It's time to test your eastern wild turkey knowledge.

# What's Got Dewlaps and Wattles?

Story By Cory Pelc  
Photos Courtesy National Wild Turkey Federation

**I**f you hear a loud yelp during a hike in the woods this spring, don't be alarmed. What you've most likely heard is a wild female turkey announcing her presence during breeding season. Toms, or male turkeys, respond to the hens' yelps with gobbles that have been known to be heard from as far as a mile away.

The different vocalizations of the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) are "gobbles," "yelps," "clucks," "putts" and "purrs," to name a few. Turkeys of both sexes

make any of these sounds, although hens do not normally gobble. In contrast, male turkeys are commonly known to yelp, especially in their immature stage where they are referred to as jakes. With so many possibilities for vocalization, how can you determine if a turkey is tom or hen, and what other characteristics can be used to age these birds?

## Male Vs. Female General Appearance

Males have an almost featherless head and neck with red wattles, or fleshy, wrinkled folds of skin, hanging from their neck and throat, along with more pronounced caruncles (fleshy growths) and dewlaps (flaps of flesh on

the undersides of the bill). Toms are larger and darker than hens, with iridescent, black-tipped body feathers. When sexually active, they can be distinguished from hens by the bright red, blue or white coloration of the head. Females have a blue-gray head and their feathers are a duller brownish-gray.

## Spurs

Toms have spurs on the backs of their lower legs, while hens do not. As a gobbler ages, its spurs become longer

**Spur length and sharpness can be used to estimate the age of male wild turkeys.**





and more pointed. As a result, the length of these spurs can be used to estimate the age of the male. A jake's (1 year-old and younger) spurs can grow up to 0.5 inches, with spur length ranging from 0.5 to 0.875 inches by the end of their second year. By the time they are 3 years old their spurs may be 0.875 to 1 inches long. Once a turkey reaches 4 years of age his spurs are usually an inch or longer. Some turkeys have been known to have spurs up to 2 inches in length.

### **Aging Based on Beards**

Male turkeys possess a beard—actually modified feathers that look like dark, coarse hairs—which sticks out from the middle of their breast. Less commonly, female turkeys also may have a beard, but it is usually shorter and thinner than those found on males.

**Tom and jake turkeys, and less commonly hens, have beards, or modified, coarse feathers that can be used to age birds up to 3 years of age.**

In an average year, about 2 percent of Illinois' spring turkey harvest is comprised of bearded hens.

Beard length is related to the age of the bird. Toms up to 1-year-old normally have 3- to 5-inch beards and those 2 years old will display beards which are 6- to 9-inches in length. If a tom's beard is 10 inches or more it can be assumed that he is at least 3 years of age or older. Beard length in older birds does not reflect continued growth because the end of the beard is worn away by dragging it on the ground.



### **Aging Based on Tail Feathers**

From about 4 to 5 months of age until their second autumn, the age of any turkey can be determined by the molting pattern of the large tail feathers, or rectrices. During the molt, smaller juvenile tail feathers are replaced by longer adult feathers in a predictable pattern—from the center of the tailfan outward. The center four to six feathers will be noticeably longer than the outside ones after one year because of the partial molt and slow replacement with adult feathers. By their second year, all rectrices will have been replaced and the full set of adult feathers forms a smooth, rounded contour.



Cory Pelc is a student at Illinois College and worked as an intern for *OutdoorIllinois*.

**An irregular tailfan outline is indicative of a juvenile wild turkey. As tail feathers are molted, longer, adult feathers grow from the center outward.**

