

# Wild Turkey

## *Meleagris gallopavo*

In the early 1800s, Wild Turkeys were apparently plentiful across the state. If anecdotal accounts of early settlers and naturalists are accurate, Ohio may have hosted one of the largest turkey populations of any state (Wright 1915). While they were originally numerous, turkeys were vulnerable to overhunting and habitat destruction. As Ohio's human population increased, turkeys declined. They became scarce in some localities as early as the 1820s, but did not completely disappear from most counties until 1850–1870. Only a few widely scattered stragglers were reported after 1880, with the latest sightings from the Toledo area and several southern counties in the early 1890s (Peterjohn 1989a, Price 1928a). Their extirpation from Ohio was poorly documented, but they probably disappeared around the turn of the century.

Wild Turkeys suffered a similar fate in adjoining states, and could not have returned to Ohio without some assistance. In February 1956, the Ohio Division of Wildlife released 10 turkeys in Vinton County (Donohoe and McKibben 1973). Similar releases were undertaken in subsequent years, totalling 397 released turkeys between 1956 and 1971. As this population increased, Wild Turkeys spread into adjacent counties. By 1971, turkeys were recorded from 17 counties but no estimate of their statewide population was available.

Their numbers continued to increase, aided by annual transplants into new areas. After sizable numbers became established along the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, these transplant efforts began to include some counties on the glaciated Allegheny Plateau. By 1981–1982, Donohoe et al. (1983) cited turkey populations in 32 counties with an estimated population of 7,677 individuals. They were most numerous within the unglaciated counties from Adams, Pike, and Ross north to Perry and Morgan. Smaller numbers were locally distributed along the remainder of the unglaciated Allegheny Plateau, while turkeys on the glaciated plateau were restricted to southern Ashtabula and northern Trumbull counties.

Turkey populations continued to increase and additional releases took place during the Atlas Project, although their statewide distribution pattern did not significantly change from that described by Donohoe et al. (1983). The Atlas Project produced reports from 121 priority blocks within 36 counties. Not surprisingly, turkeys were most widespread within the Unglaciated Plateau physiographic region with records in 48.6% of the priority blocks. In this region, they were most numerous between Adams and eastern Highland counties east to Perry, Morgan, and Athens counties, and at the northern edge of the plateau in Jefferson and Carroll counties. Turkeys were more locally distributed in the intervening counties, many of which are extensively modified by strip mining. Wild Turkeys remain scarce within the Glaciated Plateau and Illinoian Till Plain regions with records from 9.3 and 8.7% of the priority blocks

respectively, primarily from locations where they had been released or sites adjacent to the Unglaciated Plateau. The only Till Plain record was from Logan County, where turkeys were released during the Atlas Project.

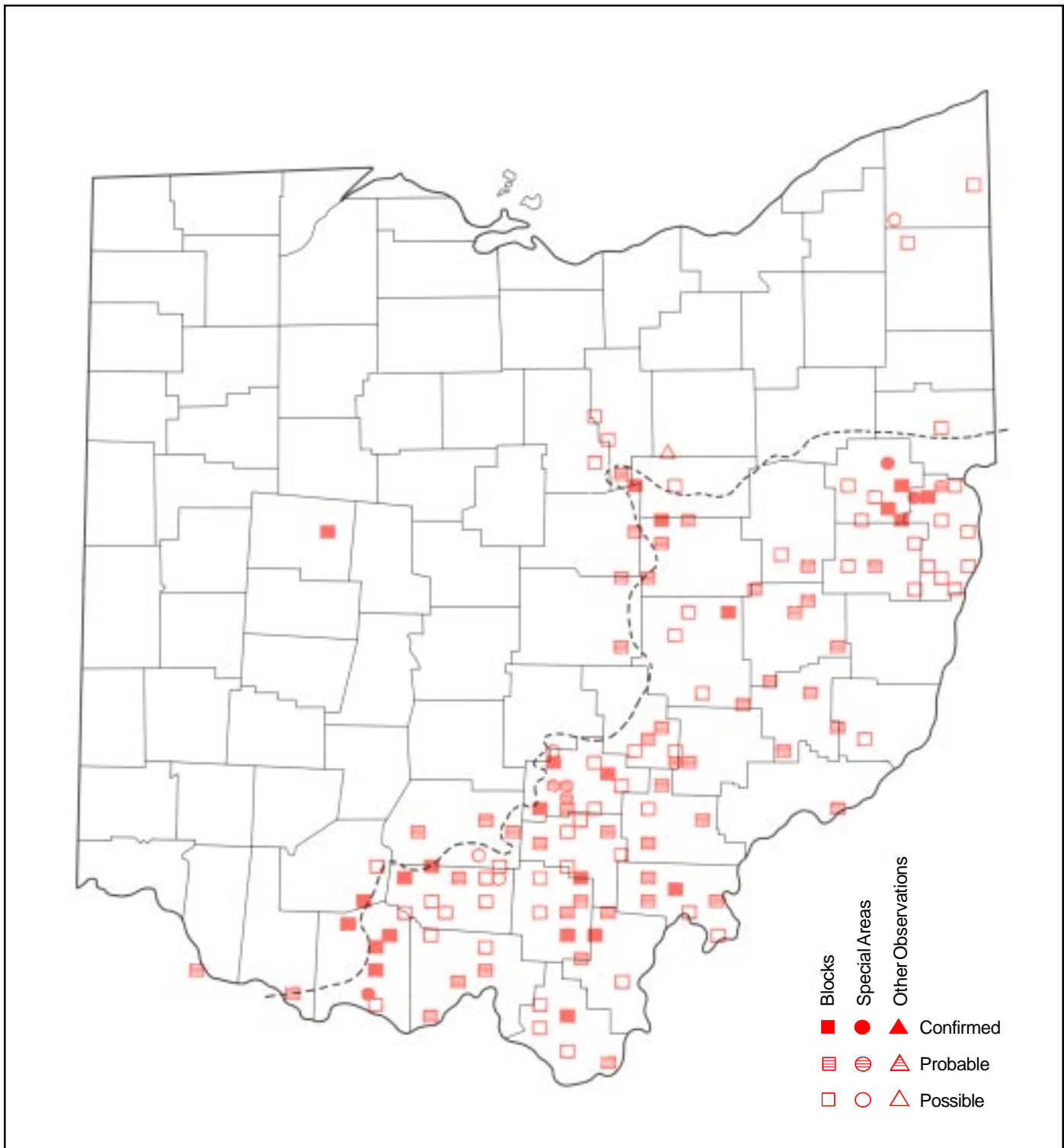
The turkey re-establishment program is continuing, but the emphasis of recent releases is becoming focused on the glaciated counties that are more intensively farmed. Whether turkeys will be able to establish thriving populations within most of glaciated Ohio remains to be determined, but their ultimate distribution in the state will be dependent upon their success in these counties where woodland habitats are rather limited.



Alvin E. Staffan

Their habitat preferences and breeding biology within Ohio are described by Donohoe and McKibben (1970). During the breeding season, turkeys are primarily occupants of deciduous and mixed woodlands. Mature woods and younger second growth woods with dense underbrush are equally acceptable, while they may also forage in clearings and the edges of open fields. Turkeys nest on the ground, usually in dense cover near woodland edges. For such a large bird, their nests are difficult to locate. Of 23 confirmed breeding records within priority blocks, only four pertained to active nests; the remainder were females accompanied with partially grown young. The other Atlas Project reports were nearly equally divided between probable and possible breeders.

Gobbling turkeys may be heard during the first warm days of March, but their courtship activities normally peak between April 1 and April 20. Most clutches are laid during the second half of April and these young hatch by late May. Turkeys will renest if their first clutch is destroyed, producing reports of incubating adults into the first half of June and females accompanied by small young during the first week of July.



**Analysis of Block Data by Physiographic Region**

Physiographic Region	Total Blocks Surveyed	Blocks with Data	% with Data	Regional % for Ohio	Ave. # Individ per BBS Route (1982–1987)
Lake Plain	95	—	—	—	—
Till Plain	271	1	0.4	0.8	—
Ill. Till Plain	46	4	8.7	3.3	—
Glaciated Plateau	140	13	9.3	10.7	—
Unglaciated Plateau	212	103	48.6	85.1	0.1

**Summary of Breeding Status**

No. of Blocks in Which Species Recorded		
<b>Total</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>15.8%</b>
Confirmed	23	19.0%
Probable	45	37.2%
Possible	53	43.8%