

WILD TURKEY

Meleagris gallopavo

Other: Turkey (<1983), *Pelehu*

M. g. intermedia (primarily)
M.g. gallopavo, merriami, silvestris (partially)

naturalized (non-native) resident, long established

The Wild Turkey historically ranged from Arizona to e. N America and Mexico (Eaton 1992, AOU 1998). They have been domesticated throughout the world, while established introduced populations can be found in w. North America, Tasmania, New Zealand, and the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* (Hewitt 1967, Long 1981, Lever 1987, Marchant and Higgins 1993). Wild Turkeys (possibly along with [Rock Pigeons](#)) were the first bird species to be introduced to post-contact Hawaii, when “a number” of domesticated birds were brought to Hawai'i Island from China in 1788 and had produced over 20 young by 1789 (Meares 1791, Locey 1937, Swedberg 1967a, Walker 1967). Bloxam (1827b) noted that turkeys were abundant on O'ahu in 1825 and Townsend (1839) noted them on Kaua'i in 1835. Continued introductions from 1815 to 1963 (Caum 1933, Swedberg 1967a) along with escapes from domestic stock have resulted in established wild populations in dry brushy areas of several Southeastern Islands. Initial abundance throughout the islands through the 1930s (Munro 1944, *PoP* 18[3]:20) was curtailed by population crashes due to an epidemic of blackheads (*Histomonas*) between 1938 and 1941 (Schwartz and Schwartz 1949), but continued reintroduction efforts by HBAF and DoFAW have resulted in persistent populations on several islands through the early 2010s.

The largest populations of Wild Turkeys exist on *Hawai'i I*, where 2-3000 were taken annually by hunters in the 1920s (Caum 1933). The population survived the epidemic on other islands of the late 1930s, being present along western slopes between 600 and 1500 m elevation (Schwartz and Schwartz 1949) and, following widespread introductions in 1958-1963 (Swedberg 1967a), they became well established in upslope habitats throughout the island (Lewin 1971, *E* 45:19). Scott et al. (1986) estimated a population of 2,000 individuals in upland areas in the late 1970s. They are most commonly found on the slopes of Hualalai and of Mauna Kea, from Pu'u La'au to Keanakolu Road, where active hunting occurred during the 1990-mid 2010s, but they also range as far as the Volcano area (Sakai and Scott 1984) and have been recorded up to the summit of Mauna Kea at >4200 m elevation (e.g., 3 there on 18 Aug 2010). Interestingly, the only other islands on which this species is thriving are three of the smaller and less-populated ones. On *Ni'ihau*, Wild Turkeys were one of the most abundant birds recorded by Fisher (1951) during a visit there in 1947. He found thousands throughout the island, of which 70% were "wild-plumaged" and 30% were white or had white feathering. Fifty were observed during an aerial [DOFAW Waterbird Survey](#) 28 Jul 1977 and they continued to be observed on Ni'ihau during a one-day trip there in Mar 2002. On *Moloka'i*, turkeys present in 1893 (Perkins *in* Evenhuis 2007:167) became especially abundant by 1905 (*PoP* 18[3]:20), and were considered increasing rapidly in 1960s (Pekelo 1964). During the 1990s through the mid-2010s, populations were concentrated in the w. half of the island as well as at Pu'u O Hoku ranch at the e. end of the island. On *Lana'i*, they were common in the early 1900s when populations

were harvested to provide Thanksgiving and Christmas turkeys for the other islands (Munro 2007). Most were rounded up for export during the 1920s, when the turkey operation was terminated, and they declined for a period, but then increased again. They have learned to catch and eat crabs on the beaches of Lana'i, and removal of "nuisance" birds from resorts and golf courses there was occurring by the 2000s. A small population of Wild Turkeys persists on *Maui*, where Scott et al. (1986) recorded them rarely on the sw. and n. slopes of Haleakala in the late 1970s, and they continued to be seen in this vicinity (and were possibly increasing around Ulupalakua Ranch and westward) through the early 2010s. Since the 1800's turkeys were occasionally encountered at scattered locations on *Kaua'i* and *O'ahu*, (e.g., they continued to be encountered in small numbers in the Wai'anae Range, O'ahu, in 1901; *PoP* 14[7]:16), but no wild individuals from these populations survived much into the 20th century, or from continued introductions on both islands in 1958-1963 (Swedberg 1967a, HAS 1975-2005, Denny 1999). However, in Jul 2015 through 2016, up to 3 adult Wild Turkeys, at least once with chicks present, have been observed in the Kuaokala GMA and elsewhere in w. O'ahu, suggesting the possibility of a population becoming re-established in this area. Early introductions to Kaho'olawe failed to result in a sustainable population (Gon et al. 1992).

Most Wild Turkeys in Hawaii currently show rusty tail tips, characteristics of the *M. g. intermedia* from Texas, the most widely introduced subspecies in 1958-1963 (Swedberg 1967a). Other subspecies (*gallopavo*, *merriami*, *silvestris*) were also introduced in smaller numbers on Hawai'i I (Lewin 1971, Sakai & Scott 1984) but these either did not persist or their plumage characteristics have become swamped by those of *intermedia*. Many earlier introductions were of birds of unknown subspecies or were from semi-domestic stock. *M.g. gallopavo* (of e. Mexico) and *M.g. merriami* (of the sw. United States and nw. Mexico), with whitish tail tips, were two of the more widely introduced subspecies elsewhere in the world during the first half of the 1900s. Whitish tail tips shown by at least some of the earlier populations in Hawaii (prior to the epidemic of 1938-1941) indicate that these subspecies were likely the primary stock for early propagation to the islands.

[Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)

[Literature cited](#)

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