

## How do you identify male and female turkeys?

Adult birds (1 year or older), especially in the spring, may be differentiated as follows:

(1) **Size:** males are about 1 1/2-2 times larger than females, but this characteristic is only useful when the two are seen together.

(2) **Body Color:** males appear dark-- often blackish-- and are more iridescent than females, while hens are browner and less iridescent. Note that the breast feathers of males are black-tipped, while those of females are tipped with a buffy brown. From a distance, these colorations may depend on viewing conditions and your perceptions.

(3) **Head and Neck:** Males usually have a white-crowned head, and a blue and/or red head. The dewlap (throat wattle) is red and larger than in the female. The neck and head have heavy, prominent warts or "caruncles". The dewlap, wattles, head and neck of the male swell and become more brightly colored in the breeding season or when the male is otherwise excited. Some hens show a reddish or pink dewlap and caruncles, but the caruncles are always smaller than in the male. Hens don't show the extensive engorging and swelling that is evident in sexually excited males. In the field, these head and neck characteristics are often the best means to distinguish adult male and female turkeys.



(4) **Beard:** Adult males almost always have a "beard" (a tuft of stiff horny filaments projecting outward from the center of the breast). This beard often wears off or breaks off as it becomes longer, rarely exceeding 12 inches in length. The beard is a good distinguishing character when the breast is clearly visible. Some males may have more than one beard. Young males ("jakes") may have short beards that are not always evident in the field. Also, some hens (1% to 30%) in some areas may have beards (est. 1-2% in MA) but these beards are usually thinner and shorter than in males. Bearded hens are not freaks or hermaphrodites and they are capable of breeding and laying fertile eggs.

(5) **Spur:** Males have a distinctive sharp projection ("spur") on the rear of the metatarsus (lower leg). It can get to be 2 inches long, but anything over 1 inch is large. Hens very rarely have spurs. Spurs are a useful characteristic when the bird is in hand, but not very visible under field conditions.

(6) **Behavior:** In the spring, adult males often display (fan their tail) and strut. They may also beat or drum their wings, and gobble and cluck. Hens may occasionally display, but typically do not strut or gobble. They may make clucking or yelping sounds.

(7) **Droppings:** the sex of turkeys may also be distinguished (fall through spring) by the appearance of the bird's droppings. See the paper by R.W. Bailey in the Journal of Wildlife Management (1956) (see also Question #20).

The two sexes may be told apart at about 4 months of age, using differences in height, feather coloration and patterning, and head and neck. In the fall, the sexes of juvenile turkeys may be told apart as follows (for adult birds, see above):

(1) **Size:** males are generally larger and taller than females, but this isn't as discrete as for adults. This character is generally only useful with experience, or when both sexes are seen clearer close together.

(2) **Body Color:** as with adults, males are generally blacker and darker, and hens lighter and browner. This isn't always apparent, especially in dim light.

(3) **Head and Neck:** this is usually the best field character. Males have pinkish or reddish skin around the eyes and on the throat, generally bare skin on the back of the head and neck, and small (usually red) warts and caruncles on the neck. Juvenile hens have a bluish-gray head and neck, more feathering than males on the back of the head and neck, and rarely any warts or caruncles.

(4) **Beard and Spur:** juvenile males may have a short beard, but this can be concealed in the breast feathers. Not a good field character, but it may be apparent if the bird is in hand. Young hens (even bearded ones) don't have a visible beard. Juvenile males don't show an actual spur, but may have a 1/8 inch or so "bump".

## How do you tell the age of turkeys?

Turkeys are most easily grouped into 2 age categories-- juveniles (juvenals), which are less than 1 year old, and adults, which are 1 year or older. "Poults" (sometime erroneously called "chicks") are newly-hatched baby turkeys. They are often called "poults" throughout the first few months of life. Juvenile male turkeys are colloquially called "jakes" and juvenile females, "jennies". Adult males are often called "toms" or "gobblers" and adult females are referred to as "hens".

Aging Methods:

(1) **Tail Feathers:** Young turkeys, from about 4-5 months of age until their second autumn, can be determined from older turkeys by the molting pattern of the large tail feathers. These feathers are called "retrices" (singular, "retrix"). These feathers are molted from the outside inward from both sides at once. In the bird's first fall and until spring, the center 4-6 feathers will be longer than the outside ones because of a partial molting pattern. By the second fall, the molt has caught up and the retrices will be all the same length. That is, in the first fall and the spring thereafter, these juvenile birds will show an uneven tail pattern when the retrices are spread out. The center feathers will protrude a few inches beyond the outside ones.



(2) **Wing Feathers:** The outer wing feathers (9th and 10th "primary" feathers, counting from the outside of the wing inward) show a distinct pattern in juvenile birds as compared to adults. In the first fall, these 2 primary feathers are not replaced in the molt. They are pointed, dark near the tip, and show little or no white barring. In adults, in which these feathers are molted along with the others, the 9th and 10th primaries are rounded near the tip (or worn down, if from a strutting male) and have white barring all the way to the tip.

(3) **Spur:** For adult males, spur length is somewhat useful in determining age, but it is not an absolute character. Generally, a spur less than 1/2-inch represents a juvenile bird, with those 1/2 to 7/8 inch from 1-year-old birds, and those 7/8 inch and larger are from birds 2 years or older.

(4) **Beard:** Beards may also show a differentiation by age, with 3 to 5 inch ones from 1-year-old birds ("jakes"), 6 to 9" from 2-year-olds, and 10" or larger from gobblers aged 3 years or more. The reliability of this aging method is also somewhat suspect, though, as beards often wear off or break.

(5) **Leg Color:** The color of the lower leg (metatarsus) can provide a rough indication of age. Young birds have a considerable amount of dark pigment in the leg and foot scales, producing a brownish or gray color. As the birds age, this pigmentation is lost and the leg color turns more pinkish or reddish.

(6) **Other:** Young birds up to 7 months old may be aged in the hand using specialized data on leg length, the molting of the primary feathers, and body weight. Aside from that, the only way to age a turkey with certainty (beyond differentiating juveniles from adults) is if the turkey is banded.