

AUDUBON'S ORIGINAL NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE WILD
TURKEY WRITTEN FOR CHARLES LUCIEN BONAPARTE

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THE original manuscript of the notes on the habits of the Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), prepared by Audubon for Charles Lucien Bonaparte, is in the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, Des Moines. It was mailed from Salem, New York, on 8 November 1898 by Maria R. Audubon, to Charles Aldrich, Secretary of the Historical Department of Iowa, Des Moines. Audubon met Bonaparte in Philadelphia in 1824, and since Bonaparte (1825) used part of the notes in his publication, there is little doubt that the manuscript was written in 1824. I wish to express my appreciation to Jack W. Musgrove, Curator, Iowa State Department of History and Archives, for calling my attention to the manuscript and for granting permission for publication.

The manuscript was unknown to Herrick (1917) for he relies on Audubon's (1831) statement that notes were furnished to Bonaparte. As to Audubon's scholarship he wrote: "At thirty-nine, he read and spoke two languages but was without adequate training in either; he had never written a line for publication, and to the scientific world he was a stranger." The present manuscript (Figure 1) shows inadequate training in grammar, spelling, and penmanship. Some allowance can be made for these deficiencies since it was his first attempt at technical composition, but it is quite certain that everything that he wrote subsequently for publication was edited to give it a readable style. It is well known that William MacGillivray wrote the technical descriptions of the birds for Audubon, and the latter gives him credit for "smoothing down the asperities" of his biographies. Bonaparte used but a small part of the notes, apparently sensing that much given on the habits of the Wild Turkey would be difficult to verify.

The superscript numbers used by Audubon to show the order in which the words were to be transposed are italicized. Where a deletion is illegible it is indicated by [d.i.]. Audubon was excessively fond of capitals. At times he would write one capital over another, or so close to an abandoned one as to give the appearance of one letter. The transcription is believed to be faithful to the original.

Account of the Wild Turkey of the United States —
Drawn from Mis. Notes ⁵ ⁶ ⁷ ¹ ^{2 3 4} of by John J. Audubon — ~~by himself~~
at the express request of the Prince of Charles of Canino.

The Size, Beauty and Intrinsic value of this Bird joined to the undisputed fact of its being entirely our own renders it perhaps more Interesting to the Naturalist

who seeks [information] on the habits of the Feathered Tribe than any others within our boundaries=

The unsettled Parts of the States of Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois and a Vast Extent nearest upon the Mississippi and Missouri and by the Courses of these Rivers to Louisiana Including the Woody Parts of Arkansas, Tennessee & Alabama are the most abundantly Supplied with this Famous Game — they are Less Plenty in Georgia or the Carolinas, become Scarcer Still in Virginia & Pennsylvania and positively now very scarce to the Eastward of the Last mentioned States — During my Rambles through Long Island — New York and around the Lakes I had not the Pleasure of Seeing one although I was told Some did really exist yet in these Parts — Such being the Case I give here the Manners of the Wild Turkey as I have observed them in the Parts first mentioned and w[h]ere I have already said they are abundant = and having resided for many years in Kentucky and Louisiana will take my stand within those Latitudes ~~of these States North Inclusive~~==

The Turkey is irregularly a Migratory Bird as also irregularly Gregarious — taking the first of these facts in Consideration I assert that ~~all the~~ when ever the Mast of one Portion of the Country Exceeds that of another the Turkeys are insensibly led to that Spot by gradually approaching meeting in their Hunts with more Fruits the farther they advance towards it and with an Judgement over my Power to Calculate follow flock after flock untill one Section is Left devoid of them Whilst the other is positively annoyed overflowed and annoyed. I would not use such Expression but as these Migrations are Irregular and cover a very Large Extent of Country it ~~will~~ ~~be~~ becomes necessary that I should Tell You the Ways in which they usually Proceed=

about the Beginning of October when the Mast is Yet almost all on the Trees these Birds assemble flocks and course themselves gradually towards the Rich Bottom Lands of the Ohio & Mississippi = The males or as they are now Comonly Called the Goblers are seen associated in Parties of from 10 to 100 hunting for food apart from the females or Hens — whilst these Latter are seen either moving singly with their own Brood of Young then about $\frac{2}{3}$ Grown, or connected with from 2 to 5 other families forming Parties often times of 70 to 80 all Intent on Shunning the old Goblers that Even when of that Very Large Size will fight and often Destroy them by ~~Picking~~ Striking their Skulls untill laid open=~~all~~ old & young however all move the same Course, and on foot except Indeed when a Large River Interferes their Way or the Hunter's swift Doggs forces them to take Wing — ~~by seeking~~ if the first [d.i.] Encounter they make choice of the highest Eminences to fly across from and on Such Spots remain often a whole day or more as if to [d.i.] consult on the Occasion — during this ~~while~~ time the Goblers males are heard Gobling, Calling and making much ado, Strutting amongst themselves as if thereby to animate each other at meeting Such dangerous events — The females and Young also are at this time possessed of much of the Same Pompous actions; the forerunners Spread the Tail obliquely and run around each other Purring Loudly and taking extraordinary Leaps along the Ground— as soon as the Weather is Calm and all around apparently Silent, the whole raise on the Highest tree tops in the Imediate Vicinity ~~when at~~ from whence at the single Cluck of the Leading female or Gbler the flock all at once Sail [d.i.] towards the opposite Shore; all the fat and old Birds easily reach across a River a Mile Wide but as the others progressively are poorer & younger they fall then further from the Desired Spot — not to be Drowned however as many Persons might expect but to swim very dexterously by Spreading their Tail as a Support, Closing their Wings peaceably (calmly) to their body stretching

their Necks and moving their Legs with extreme rapidity, and Let me here Say that when the Shores are Steep the Birds on approaching Immediately under them, Stop their Motions, float a few Minutes and by a Violent effort generally extricate themselves from the Watter, it is remarkable that Immediately after thus Crossing a Large Stream they will ramble as if rather at a Loss for Some time and during ~~such~~ this many are Destroyed by hunters — as You will see in the Sequel, on their arrival in those Parts where the Mast is abundant the Turkeys disperse in smaller flocks mixing all ages together and Sex together and devour all before them— This is about the Middle of November — so Gentle are they sometimes after their long Journey, that they will approach the Buildings of the Farms and Plantations, associate with the Tame fowls and go into Stables and Corn Cribs after food, thus the autumn and part of the Winter by them is spent = as soon as the middle of February the propagating Call of Nature operates Strongly on them [d.i.] the females separate and again by themselves fly from the Males, while these strenuously follow them and beginning regularly to perform the Gobbling Call Sound of Exultation— roosted apart although not very far Distant from Each other — When a female gives a call note, the Gobblers in hearing all return the Sound, rolling note after note as fast as if about giving the Last with the first together; not Spreading their tail as when Courting near them or Practising on the Branches of the Trees on which they have roosted all Night, but much as the tame Turkeys do when a Singular Noise is offered to their ears and repeated often — if this Call of the female is Issuing from the Ground all the males fly Immediately toward it whether or not in Sight of the Hen they then Spread & erect their Tail, throw their Heads back on the Shoulders and Walk Pompously; Shivering their Wings with a Puff from the Poulmons (lungs) at the same time— Stopping to Listen as well as to look where the female is and resume the Strutting again either Seen or unseen — but moving as fast as these Ceremonies will permit admit of— Whilst at this it often takes place that two Males see each other, in Such a Case Dreadfull Battles ensues in which Many Males are Killed (Recollect that John A. Audubon writes under an Influence Beyond the Power of Common Men to Conceive and that he Writes only What he has seen and not heard only) by Picking on the Head of the Weakest untill completely exhausted— (I could say more here, but unwilling to be thought ridiculous I Stop and Hope to see my Knowledge displayed by others some time hence who will speak the truth in this — of the Word opinion) after such an Encounter or when it does not take place and the male has discovered the approach of the female if She is not of the same Year, she also struts and even Goble Evincing much Desire turning around the Cocq (that is yet strutting) and Suddenly opening her Wing throws herself towards the Male as if to put a Stop to his Idleness, Lays herself down and receives his ~~do~~ very Delitery Caresses= I believe that this forms a particular Lasting Conexion between that Male & Female for that Season although the former does by no means confine himself to one as I have witnessed his attractions & Caresses to [d.i.] several when coming on them at the same time for the first time— I further believe that this or those females follow their favourite Cocq & Roost ~~his~~ in his Imediate Neighborhood if not on the same tree untill they begin to Lay, when a new mode of Life is adopted to save their Eggs from the Male who will Brake all of them to promote and have further occasion to Enjoy his Lascivious appetite = the females then Shun the Cocqs at the Exception of a Short time Every Day — the Males themselves become Clumsy, Loaf and gradually more Careless, Chat between themselves without fighting and so much have ceased to Goble or to Call that the Hens do all the advancing now and yelp Loudly and almost continuously for them — at such times I

have seen the females Caress the males using the same male movements to warm them into action and received at last the benefit needed= If the Cocq Meets a Young Hen, he struts diferently, his movements are obstreperously quick, he will sometimes raise from the Ground and take a short flight round (in the Manner of Some Pigeons, the Red Breasted Thrush and many other Birds) and alighting again Rubb his tail and wings for as much as ten paces, running with all his Powers — draw near the timorous female and Purr untill she abandons herself= Turkey Cocqs when on the Roost sometimes Strut & Goble, but more generally I have seen them Spread & Raise their tails and merely give the Poulmonic Puff Lowering the Tail and all [d.i.] their other feathers in a moment, of moon Shining nights this action is performed for hours every few minutes without moving from the same spot and Indeed sometimes without raising on their Legs particularly towards the Latter part of the Season of Love = When the males are emaciated, the Breast Sponge completely expended (the Cause in my opinion) they no more gobles goble — they separate Entirely and one would suppose that not a Turkey Cocq is about, I have found them at such a time Lying under Logs in very retired Parts of Densest Woods and Canebrakes flushing them oftentimes within a few feet of me — They will then run only but run swiftly and for a great Distance, a slow Turkey Hound has Led me miles before I could again flush the same Bird, again hid under a Log — such Chase I have taken not because I Longed to Kill the Bird for then it is not fit to eat is full of covered with Turkey Ticks and very poor and Stringy but to know what I say here try acquire the Knowledge I have — they thus retire to recover Their strength afresh by purging with particular Grasses & using Less Exercise = as soon as able they meet again Goblers with Goblers as I have first Mentioned and recommence their Rambles = I will return to the females and follow them in their nesting, Incubation & raising of their brood—

about the Middle of April when the Season is Dry the females Look in search of Places to Deposit their first Egg — free from Watter at all times and as much as possible from the Wily Crows Eye — crows will watch the Hen going to her nest and will wait untill she is gone — somewhere on a Dry Ridge in the fallen top of a dead Leafy Tree, under a thicket of Shoemack (sumac) — Briars or a few feet in the Edge of a Cane Brake though on a ridge — there by the side of a Log She Scoops a Place and Deposits an Egg, untill She has as many sometimes 20 more usually however from 10 to 15 allways approaching the Place with Extreme Caution scarce ever twice by the same Course and Covering with regular attention the whole with Dry Leaves; rendering it extremely Dificult to point out the Spot even by a Person who has seen the Bird several times at its maneuvers— Indeed few Turkeys' Nests are found unless by Starting the female Sudenly from it, or a Cunning Linx — Fox, or Crow has Sucked the Eggs and Left the Shells Scattered around and about; when Laying or Sitting if an Enemy approaches within her Sight, She never moves unless She knows she has been discovered but Shrinks Lower and Suffers it to pass — how Eminently they Possess that Knowledge you well may judge when I tell you that having Known of a Nest I have frequently passed by assuming an air of Carelessness, whistling or talking to myself 5 or 6 paces (I would say fast) of one that would never suffer me to approach nearer than 20 Paces if I went Cautiously towards her, but ran off Instantly with her Tail spread on one side 20 to 30 Paces, when assuming a stately Gait would poised Every Step She made and utter every now & then a Cluck = They seldom will abandon their Eggs or Nest when Discovered by Men, but I believe will never go near the Place if a Snake or any animal has Sucked any of them = if the Eggs are taken off and Destroyed She soon Yelps for a male and

Lays again, but otherwise raises only one Brood of a Season = Several Turkey Hens will associate together & deposit their Eggs in the same nest (I believe for Safety Sake) [d.i.] and [d.i.] Raise their Brood together; I found once three setting on 42 Eggs, then at Least one is altho the Nest is Kept constantly by some one and no Crow Raven and perhaps not Even a Pole Cat Dare approach it—

I have witnessed the Hatching of a Brood of Turkeys when anxious to secure the young and female; the Latter of which will not Leave her Eggs when near hatching under any Consideration but to rob her of her Eggs — the Loss of her Life, and will suffer an Enclosure to be made around her and Consequently be perfectly made a Prisoner rather than to abandon them — I have Laid flat within a very few feet and seen her raise from the Eggs half the Length of her Legs, Looking anxiously toward them, Cluck with a sound peculiar at Such time and that can only belong to mothers on such occasion, remove carefully the Each half Empty Shell and with her bill Caress and Dry the Young Born, that already stands tottering attempting to force itself from the Nest — Yes I have seen this and have abandoned Mother and Young to better Care than mine could Ever have been that of my Creator — have seen them all freed from the hard Envelope and in a few Moments, Tumble, roll, and Push each other forward with Instinct incalculable; the mother before Leaving Entirely the Nest Shakes herself astonisly (astonishingly) pick the Feathers about her Belly and seems to assume a Diferent Mien, for whilst her Eyes are alternatly ~~ob~~ Enclined obliquely upward, then Side Ways with outstretched neck to discover, either Hawks, or other Ennemies, her Wings are Partly Spread and She Clucks softly to Keep under Her the Innocent family — they move Slowly, and as they generally hatch during the afternoon often return to Spend the first ~~succeeding~~ following night in the Nest = afterwards they remove some Distance Keeping on the Highest Rolling Grounds the mother fearing rainy Weather that is Extremely dangerous at this tender age when the Young are only covered with a Kind of Softest Hairy Down and delicate to an astonishing degree for a few Days: very rainy Seasons Turkeys are Scarce, if compleatly Wetted the Young will not recover = In about Two Weeks the whole Brood Leaves the ground at Night when they had heretofore roosted under the female and fly to some very Large Low Branch where nearly divided they put themselves under the Deeply Curved Wings of the Carefull and Kind Parent — then is the time that they Leave the Woods during day and approach the natural opennings or Prairies in Hunt Search of Strawberries and Subsequently & Black Berries, Dew Berries & Where many Young Grass Hoppers aford them plentiful food and whilst [d.i.] the ~~Rays of the Sun~~ sun light is beneficial to them — It is then they began to Wallow on abandoned deserted aunts nests to Clean off from themselves Loose Skin of their growing feathers and prevent Ticks and other Vermin from attacking thick as these Insects cannot bear the odour of this Earth in which the Aunts have Worked and Inhabited = The young Turkeys at this Time make Rapid Strides in their Growth and by August are stout and very able to Secure themselves from unexpected attacks of the Wolves foxes Linkes or Even the Cougars by their quick manner of raising from the Earth by the Help of their powerfull Legs and reaching with Ease the Highest Limbs of the very Tallest Trees = Hens that have Laid and Hatched Singly meeting another brood will form a Connexion and move together = the Young Cocks Show the Knot on the Breast about this Time, attempt Gobling & Strutting, and the Young Hens will Purr and Leap about, as I have mentioned when on their Journeys Peregrinations = the old Cocqs have also assembled and probably the all of the Turkeys will now Leave this Portion of the Country to remove to that on the Wabbash, Illinois Black River or the Neighborhood of the northwest coast of Lake Erie—

amongst the numerous Enemies of the Wild Turkey I Consider the Linx ~~and~~ the Strix Nictæa, and Strix Virginus as those to be most Dreaded = the first Sucks the Eggs and is extremely Expert at seizing both Young & old, by following them a While to assure himself of the real course of the flock or Single Bird is Going, and afterward by taking a quick circular route bringing the Linx Immediately in front of the Turkeys where he Lays Snugly in ambush untill assured that by a Single Bound he will Secure one = Whilst sitting once high on the Wabash River I remarked a Couple of Large Turkey Cocks on a Log by the Side of the Stream pluming and Picking themselves — I watched their movements for a while when Suddenly, one flew off across the River whilst I plainly Saw the other Struggling in Vain from the Biting of a Common Size Linx = when attacked by our two Largest species of Owls named above — they often make their Escape in a way that is perhaps only Known by real hunters and myself. it is as follows — as Turkeys roost usually in flocks, on Clear Branches of the Trees they are easily Discovered by their Enemies; these on Wings of Softest Motions approach them and fly about them to reconnoiter the force of the Body, this is rarely done however without being discovered and a Single Cluck of one of them announces the approach of the murderer to the Whole party — all Immediately raise on their Legs and Watch the owls Motions, ~~he approaches~~ this one having made a choice Comes Like an arrow and would Secure the Turkey did ~~he~~ not this one Immediately Lower his Head, Squat, Spread his Tail over the back in an Inverted Manner so completely that the owl Glances over it without hurting the Turkey, that then at the Same Instanz throws himself head Long toward the Ground Where the Owl Will Not attack him =

The Weights of Turkey Hens generally averages about 9 pounds avcir Dupois = I have however shot Barren Hens in Strawberry season that Weight 13 lb and I have seen some few that would Supas that they had busted open on falling from a Tree when Shot = Male Turkey differ more in their Bulk and Weight — from 15 to 18 pound may be a fair Calculation — yet I Saw one offered for sale in the Louisville market that weighed Thirty Six of which the Breast appendage measured upwards of a foot — these Birds are very tenacious of their feeding places as well as the Trees on which they have once roosted if not Drove off unexpectedly — flocks have been Known to resort to Certain Cantonments for years Together, even after returning from forein Excursions after food =

I have been told that Closet Naturalists suppose the Hen Turkey to be dispossed of the breast appendage but believe me it is no such a thing in full grown Birds = the Young Males (as I have said) at the approach of the first Winter Show this merely as a Knot on the flesh at that part — the female does not yet — the second Yea[r] the Males very recognizable by the Gant Lengthiness shew this Hairy Tuft about 4 Inches Long— the females that are not barren exhibited it Little — the 3d year the Turkey Male may be called full Grown although they Certainly Increase in Weight and Size for Several Years more = the females at 4 Year old are in full beauty, of good Size and Coloring and Possess the appendage 4 or 5 Inches Long but more thinner than that of the Cocks — the barren Hens have not that untill a very Late age — the real hunters Know them in the flock and their Rifle Ball Kills them in Preference to any = the great number of Young Hens without it has no Doubt given Raise to the false assersion mentioned above of their been Destitute—

The food of this Bird is not Confined to any particular thing — although When Plenty I believe they prefer the Pacan Nut and Winter Grape to any other Nourishment — Corn — Acorns — all descriptions of Berries and fruits — beetles, Grapes and Even Tad poles and Small Lizards I have found in their Craw —

I have now Given you all the Information that I Conceive You may have a wish to obtain (from the confersation that took Place at our Last Meeting) about the Wild Turkey's Natural habits — I ~~would~~ should undoubtedly have wrote much more extensively and probably given You a full Copy of all my observations had You not as Willson says thrown Cold Water on me at that Time — Yet as my Intentions and Constant Wishes are [d.i.] not retaliative — I Will now ~~say~~ give a Part of those Habits of this Noble Bird when connected with a Knowledge of our Species.

The Wild Turkey is now generally really Wild and whenever he Espies man either Red or White moves ~~Instin~~ positively Instinctively from him, and all our astuces (skills) are oftentimes unavailing in ~~producing~~ toward Producing the Desired Effect (that of Securing such a Valuable Bird of Game) —

During Spring when the Cocqs are much Emaciated by their Connections with the females it happens sometimes that in rase Campagne (open country) if followed by a Swift Cun Dog they will be overcome, will Squat as our Little Partridge Does and suffers to be taken by either the Dog or the Hunter who has followed Swiftly on a Good Horse, — I have heard of Such a thing ~~being~~ having been done, never have myself Experienced that Gratification —

During Melting Snow falls — Turkeys will travel an extraordinary Distance and then are followed in Vain Generally by any description of Hunters — they have then a Loose Stragling & Dangling Way of Running that is Easy to themselves, but that cannot be equalled in Swiftness by Scarcely any other annimal and I have oftentimes when on a Good Horse ~~have~~ been obliged to abandon the Idea of Putting them up after following them for Several Hours — this ~~prtinacy~~ of habit of continued running off ~~Swiftly~~ in Rainy or Very Damp Weath falling Weather of any Kind is not only remarkable in Wild Turkey but in any Bird of the Same Genus Both in America and France to my very Certain Knowledge through a Long Course of ~~undesisting~~ unwearied Experience — here the Partridges, the Ruff Grouse, and the two subsequent species discovered by Myself all possess the same Natural Tendency of action.

Turkeys are destroyed in Greatest numbers when most Worthless i.e. when travelling in the fall or autumn — when many are Killed when falling in the Rivers While attempting Crossing them on the Wing or Imediately afterwards with the Gun —

During Winter many of our real hunters shoot them by Moon Light Night on the Roost when many of these Birds will stand a repetition of Misgui the Report of a Riffle when they ~~they~~ would fly at the attack of an owl and perhaps at the Sight of it — Thus oftentimes nearly a whole flock is secured by men adequate to the Task of using Such Guns in similar Circumstances —

During Spring Turkeys are Called (as it is Termed) by Sucking Breath threw one of the Second Joint Bones of a Turkey's Wing in a Particular Way, that is not now in my Power to Describe to You — This Call is Imitation of the female's Voice and as long as ~~completely~~ accurately issued from the bone, the Male will advance toward the performer untill Killed — but no fault must be comitted Turkeys are quick of hearing and when half Civilized very wary and Cunning =, I have known many to answer to the Call above ~~described~~ mentioned without moving a step and thus Defeat the hunters expectations Completely who dares not move from his Hiding place fearing that a Single Glance of the Bird of [d.i.] eye would ~~Deprive him of~~ destroy all further attempts in Decoying him thus = Many are Shot when on the roost in the Spring by answering with a Rolling Gobling to the Imitation Sound of the Cry of the Very Common Bird the Barred Owl They will answer every time that Noise is Imitated and approached with ease if about Day Light — and Killed Easily —

Hundreds are Caught in Pens — This is so common and ordinary way of Katching them, that Confident You Know well the whole of Such Proceedings I shall not say a word on the Subject.

Wild Turkeys will often come to Tame ones and feed with them — fight and drive these Latter off from the food and Scarcely ever Meet With resistance = The Cocqs particularly will Court the ~~Civilized~~ Domesticated females and are generally greeted by them and their owners, who well Know the advantages of such Connections — the half breed being more hardy than the tame consequently easier raised.

It would be useless for me to give You My Thelical (technical?) Descripxtion of a Turkey Either Male or female — I shall Leave to Your better Way of Expression this task at Present = Should You however feel any particular Inclination to Know more of this Bird to Keep to Yourself what I could say of its habits I shall be ready at all Times to meet Your Wishes — Sincerely a friend to Both Nature and
You — J. J. A.

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