

Turkey Oddities

EACH SPRING TURKEY SEASON, THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE, FISHERIES, AND PARKS (MDWFP) RECEIVES NUMEROUS PHONE CALLS AND LETTERS ABOUT unusual wild turkeys that hunters have seen or harvested. The abnormalities that occur in turkeys prove that Mother Nature is far from perfect.

■ SPURS

A normal gobbler has one spur on each leg. Spurs generally increase in length and become sharper and more curved as a gobbler gets older. Sometimes there are exceptions to the rule. Mature gobblers without spurs, or with only one spur, comprise less than two percent of the total harvest. It is more common for gobblers to be missing a spur on only one leg than to not have any spurs. Legs without spurs look similar to that of a hen, although they are larger in size.



Most white phase turkeys are hens. Occurrence of partially white gobblers is extremely rare.

(white). Recessive genes or mutations account for the color abnormalities. These color variations occur infrequently with the white or smoky-grey phase being the most common. More than 95% of the reported observations of white turkeys are hens. These hens are native wild turkeys and are capable of producing offspring that are partially white, normal colored, or a mix of partially white and normal colored birds within the same brood.



Above: This gobbler, the current non-typical state record, has 9 beards measuring a total of more than 53 inches. Right: Beards begin to grow at 14 to 17 weeks. These 5 beards were from a 6-month-old gobbler.



This double-spurred gobbler was harvested during the 2000 turkey season in Copiah County.

Another abnormality is

when gobblers have multiple spurs. According to Lovett Williams, a renowned turkey biologist in Florida, less than two dozen gobblers with double spurs have been reported. There are only two reports of birds with triple spurs – one of which is from Mississippi.

■ COLOR PHASES

The wild turkey has three distinct color variations from normal plumage coloration: melanistic (black), erythritic (red), and albinotic

■ BEARDS

Typical gobblers have only one beard that continues to grow throughout their life. About two percent of gobblers have multiple beards. Normally the longest and thickest beard is on the bottom with each subsequent beard growing directly above the other and being progressively shorter in length.

