

EVIDENCE OF WILD TURKEYS IN MINNESOTA PRIOR TO EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Some scholars question the existence of wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*) in Minnesota prior to European settlement. We conducted a literature search for reliable evidence of wild turkey existence in Minnesota. There were 6 reliable historic wild turkey sightings for southern Minnesota. Based on these sightings, we estimated the northern ancestral wild turkey range for Minnesota (Figure 1).

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 4 decades, wild turkeys have been successfully reintroduced into Minnesota (Minnesota DNR 2006). At the turn of the 20th century, the wild turkey population declined and was extirpated in much of the United States due to over hunting and loss of habitat (Aldrich 1967a, Lewis 1987, Kennamer et al. 1992, Minnesota DNR 2006). The last documented sighting of wild turkeys in Minnesota prior to restoration was in 1871 (Leopold 1931, Latham 1956). Still, some scholars question whether wild turkeys were indigenous to Minnesota, because historical references are incomplete or perhaps erroneous. There are apparently no historical specimens and Swanson (1940) stated that “no trustworthy turkey record for Minnesota” exists. The objective of this research was to locate, summarize, and evaluate the various reports about wild turkeys in Minnesota, prior to European settlement.

METHODS

We conducted a literature search for historical documentation of wild turkeys in Minnesota. The literature that we searched included books, articles and reports in archives, journal entries, and publications from the Minnesota Historical Society and the Wisconsin Historical Society. The objectives for this research was to evaluate the accuracy of the historical information pertaining to wild turkeys in Minnesota and estimate their ancestral range.

RESULTS

It has been questioned whether wild turkeys were actually native to Minnesota (Roberts 1932; Aldrich 1967b). As noted, Swanson (1940) found “no trustworthy turkey record for Minnesota.” Roberts (1932: 425) stated: “There is no absolutely positive evidence that the Wild Turkey ever existed in Minnesota. No eye-witness has left a written record so far as can be found, and no Minnesota specimen is in existence. The tales of a few old men, which were passed on to the generation of fifty years ago, are all that remain.”

Aldrich (1967b) reported a specimen marked “Minnesota” located in the University of Kansas’ collection for the basis of including Minnesota in the northern ancestral wild turkey range. However, according to the museum records no known “Minnesota” specimen exists (Mark B. Robbins, Ornithology collection manager, personal communication: 2008).

There is confusion over the nomenclature used for wild turkeys in historic literature (Schorger 1942). In historic records, outarde and cogs d’Inde have been used for wild turkey in addition to Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) and sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*). Canada goose, to the French in Quebec and Illinois was known as outarde (Schorger 1942). Outarde has also been used in reference to an Indian (Connor 1804). The wild turkey has also been called dindon and bustard (Schorger 1942). Schorger (1942) mentions that outarde was also a large stocky bird that spreads its tail during the mating period, which describes a wild turkey.

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Early explorers gave names to animals that they encountered that were similar to those in Europe (Schorger 1942). In the upper Mississippi Valley, the sandhill crane became known as turkey or northern turkey (Schorger 1942). Schorger (1942) mentions a reference of cogs d'Inde sitting in trees; which he states can only mean wild turkeys and not a Canada goose.

Louis Hennepin, in 1680, mentioned killing bustards (or wild turkeys) while traveling along the Mississippi River near Lake Pepin (near Lake City, Minnesota) (Hennepin 1698). Schorger (1942) does not give strength to these claims, because Hennepin later mentions 3-4 turkeys being killed by one shot. Schorger (1942) concluded that the terminology is varied throughout Hennepin's writings. For example, in the Lake Pepin reference, cogs d'Inde and outarde refer to wild turkeys, but in other parts of Hennepin's book, they clearly did not refer to wild turkeys (Schorger 1942).

Another reference to wild turkeys near Lake Pepin on the Mississippi River occurred in 1766 (Carver 1766). Carver (1766) mentioned observing wild turkeys in his journals when traveling near Lake Pepin. Schorger (1966) discredits his reference, because he claims Carver plagiarized Hennepin. Carver's work has been very controversial, but Parker (1976) felt Carver's writings were reliable.

Leopold (1931) includes Carver's 1776 sighting in his wild turkey ancestral range in southern Minnesota. Leopold (1931) also used 2 references: from Blue Earth County along the Minnesota River dated 1773 and in Rock County dated 1871. Leopold (1931) did not give the source of the Rock County sighting. Pond (1773) was the source of the Blue Earth County sighting. Pond (1773) notes that the land along the "River St. Peter" had an abundance of animals including turkeys in the woods and meadows. In a footnote, the River St. Peter is the Minnesota River. The exact location of the wild turkey sightings along the Minnesota River was not given.

We found 2 other turkey sightings for Minnesota from the 1850s. Roberts (1919: 29) refers to a conversation he had with Dr. Wm. C. Portmann in June 1893 about wild turkeys in Jackson County, Minnesota:

"About thirty years ago, a farmer named Stone killed four Wild Turkeys from a flock of about thirty that lived in a piece of heavy timber in a bend of the Des Moines River just at the Iowa-Minnesota line. The farmer himself told Dr. Portmann of the occurrence.

Another old resident of Jackson corroborated the statement."

Also, Roberts (1932: 427) cites a survey that was conducted by T. Surber in 1920 on the Root River Valley in Fillmore County, Minnesota. A statement about wild turkeys from John C. Smith, an early settler, was dated December 2, 1929 and reads:

"In reply to your letter of November 30, in regard to Wild Turkeys in southeastern Minnesota at an early date. My father settled near Forestville in 1850, when only twelve years old. Many times I have heard him tell of shooting Wild Turkeys. One that he told of shooting was a great old gobbler that he got only after many days of hunting. This bird was killed near the headwaters of the south branch of the Root River in Forestville Township. This much I am sure of, that Wild Turkeys were at one time found in Forestville Township in the early days, say 1850 to 1860."

Roberts (1932) noted that limited evidence existed to support the presence of wild turkeys in Minnesota, and, if present, they existed "only in the extreme southern part of the state along the Mississippi River and its tributaries and at the headwaters of the Des Moines River in Jackson County."

Hatch (1892) noted that wild turkeys were found in southwestern Minnesota around the 1860s. He states, "Thirty-three years ago the Wild Turkey was not a rare bird in northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota, since which I have received no report from it, and I am of the opinion that it has now (1891) totally disappeared from our State. Possibly a straggler may yet be recognized in the southwest extreme of the timber land of that section, and if so I trust that the fact may find publicity through some channel."

Zimmer (1923) stated that wild turkeys were located in every state but Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana in the exploration and settlement days. He also mentions that large wild turkey numbers were still being reported in

the upper valleys of the Mississippi River. The Pre-Columbian estimated wild turkey population for Minnesota was 250 with the birds occupying roughly 500 square miles (Schorger 1966).

Most wild turkey habitat (deciduous forests) in southern Minnesota is found: (a) along the Mississippi River and its adjoining tributaries from its junction with the Minnesota River to the Iowa border; (b) on the Minnesota River from Mankato to Minneapolis; and (c) north of St. Paul along the St. Croix River (Wunz 1992). The former comprises the largest block of habitat because many of the Mississippi's tributaries drain the Driftless area. This area is made up of intensely incised coulees that comprise micro-climates for hardwoods such as black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioicus*) and various oak species such as red oak (*Quercus rubra*), white oak (*Quercus alba*), and bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) (Schlesinger and Funk 1977, Williams 1990). Black walnuts in Minnesota are at the northern end of their range (Schlesinger and Funk 1977, Williams 1990).

When looking at the historical range of wild turkeys in Minnesota it was useful to also examine data for Wisconsin, because similar habitats for wild turkeys were present and the St. Croix River and Mississippi River form the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin. Sufficient evidence indicates that wild turkeys occupied southern Wisconsin from Prairie du Chien to Green Bay (Schorger 1942). Oak forests, suitable wild turkey habitat, extended 200 miles north of Prairie du Chien along the Mississippi River between Minnesota and Wisconsin (Evrard 1993).

There are references of wild turkeys north of the Twin Cities in Pine County, Minnesota and Burnett County, Wisconsin. However, at the time of settlement, records of wild turkey observations by early settlers were very rare, likely because of a severe winter in 1842-43 with heavy snow that possibly instigated the extirpation of wild turkeys from much of Wisconsin (Hoy 1882, Schorger 1942, Kumlien and Hollister 1951). A 'northern' reference is from a fur-trade site on the Snake River near what is today Pine City in Pine County, Minnesota. Thomas Connor (1804) stated in his diary on 18 October, "Piero gave me 1 Outarde and 12 large Ducks." It is not clear what outarde means in this context, because earlier in this reference, an outarde meant an Indian. Evrard (1993) believed that the outarde in this context was likely a wild turkey. In this context it appears that the animal was a turkey and not a Canada goose, because he refers several times to geese in this entry. Evrard (1993) stated that John Sayer, the fur trader at the North West Company, received the outarde from Ojibway hunters near Pine City, Minnesota. Interestingly, Evrard's statement about the Ojibway hunter and trader Sayer are not present in the original source material (Connor 1804). The inclusion of Ojibway is important because by this time the Ojibway had occupied the northern-forested realms of Minnesota and had driven the Dakota onto the southern prairies of Minnesota (Froiland 1990). Thus, Ojibway in this context implies a northern location.

A wild turkey bone was found in Burnett County, Wisconsin, approximately 30 miles northeast of Pine City, Minnesota. The bone was found at a site that used to be the North West Company and XY Company fur trading post that was occupied during the winters of 1802-03 and 1804-05 (Ewen 1983). During the 1800s the dominant tree type was white pine (*Pinus strobus*) and the river was lower and narrower (Ewen 1983). Turkey was in the list of identified species, but was reported by Ewen (1983) as, "tentative identifications due to the fragmentary nature of the element or lack of comparative specimen." The bone that was identified as *Meleagris gallopavo*, was found in the NW Company site (Ewen 1983).

DISCUSSION

Some authors believe the evidence that wild turkeys are native to Minnesota is inconclusive, and without an actual specimen, Minnesota should not be included in the ancestral wild turkey range (Roberts 1932, Aldrich 1967b, Green and Janssen 1975). Based solely on this criterion, there is not enough evidence to conclude wild turkeys were native to Minnesota. However, based on many sightings of wild turkeys prior to European settlement and shortly thereafter, we believe enough evidence exists to support that wild turkeys inhabited southern Minnesota before being extirpated from much of the Midwest in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Wild turkeys were found in the river valleys of the Mississippi, Minnesota, Rock, and Des Moines Rivers. Based upon maps of Minnesota's pre-settlement vegetation, wild turkey habitat was found in these areas of Minnesota (Marschner 1974).

Several authors have drawn the northern extent of wild turkey's ancestral line to include southern Minnesota (Leopold 1931, Mosby 1949, Mosby 1959, Eaton 1992, Wunz 1992). Schorger's (1966) version of the wild turkey northern ancestral line contained only southeastern Minnesota. Leopold's (1931) version covered only southwestern Minnesota, although he noted sightings in southeastern Minnesota.

We project the northern ancestral line for wild turkeys in Minnesota in Figure 1, based on 6 wild turkey sightings from 1680, 1766, 1773, 1850, 1863, and 1871 in southern Minnesota (Hennepin 1680, Carver 1766, Pond 1773, Roberts 1919, Leopold 1931, Roberts 1932). The wild turkey sightings in Pine County, Minnesota and Burnett County, Wisconsin, while noted in Figure 1, are assumed unreliable, based on qualifications in the original documents as noted earlier in this report. Connor (1804) and Ewen (1983) provided evidence that wild turkeys could have existed as far north as Pine County, Minnesota around the early 1800s. Some authors doubt the reliability of these references because the nomenclature that was used for wild turkeys in historical writing is confusing. If wild turkeys were found this far north, they were probably very rare and likely moved up the Mississippi River Valley and the St. Croix River Valley during mild winters and later killed off during winters with deep and persistent snow cover.

Since the exact location of the 1773 sighting in Figure 1 is unknown, the northern ancestral line includes a large portion of the Minnesota and Mississippi River Valleys (Figure 1). Based on the pre-settlement vegetation (Marschner 1974) and Pond's (1773) journal, there was suitable wild turkey habitat found along the Mississippi River to the Minneapolis/St. Paul region and south along the Minnesota River. Wild turkeys could have been found along the Minnesota River from the Minneapolis/St. Paul region south to Mankato.

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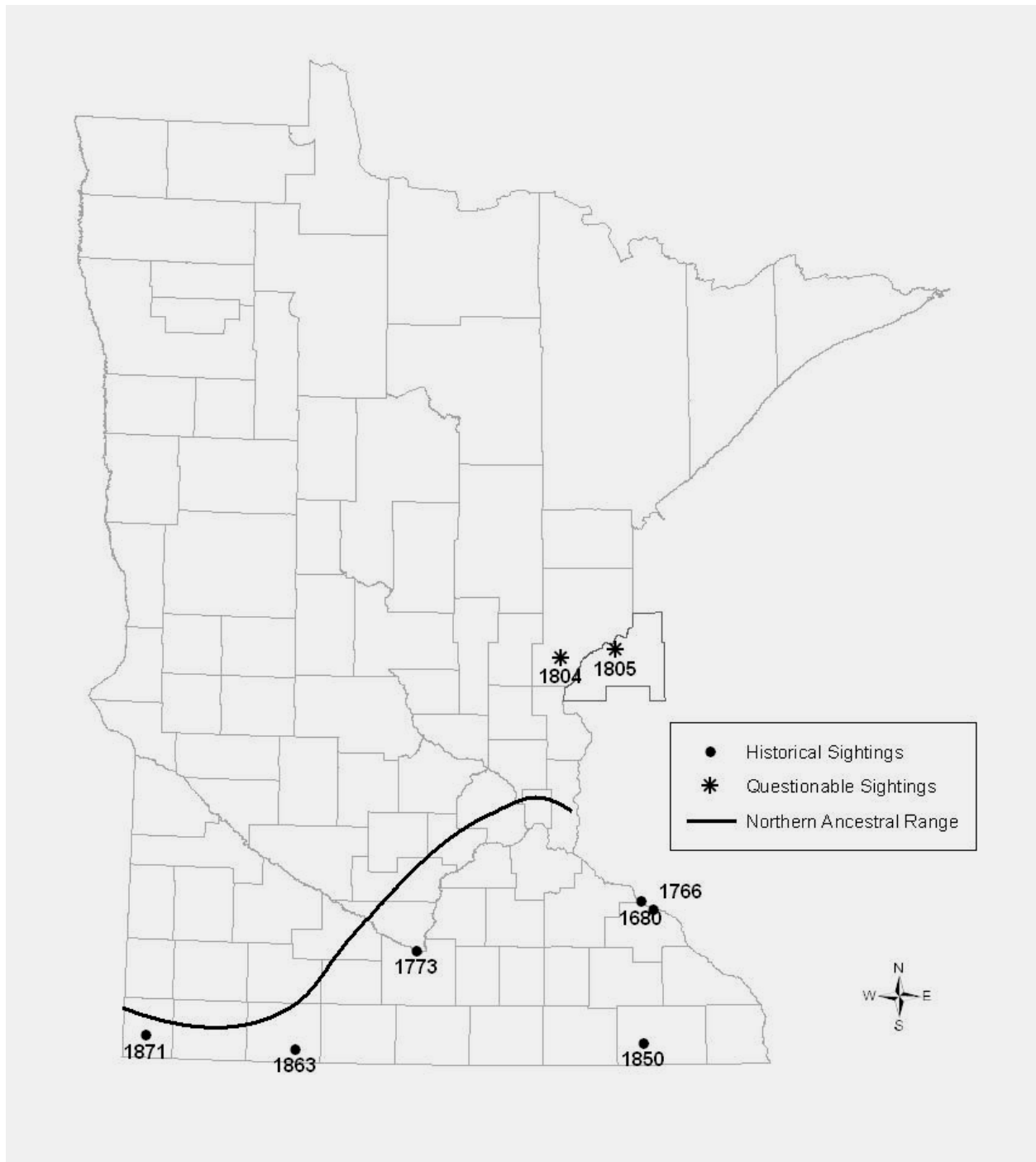


Figure 1. Northern ancestral range and sightings of wild turkeys in Minnesota.