

MOUNTAINS

Wild turkeys are intelligent, community-minded



Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart
Columnist

When I moved to Asheville in 2013, I got a job at The Compleat Naturalist in Biltmore Village. One day a man came into the store and we got to talking about wildlife. I told him I had recently enjoyed a short film called “My Life as a Turkey.” He responded, “That’s based on the book ‘Illumination in the Flatwoods: A Season Living Among the Wild Turkey’ by Joe Hutto.”

A Florida-based naturalist and biologist, Hutto wrote “Illumination” in 1995 after having raised a flock of wild turkeys from eggs to adults in the Apalachicola National Forest. The birds imprinted on him as their parent; he learned about their innate knowledge of the natural world and the intricate ways they communicate with one another. When in 2006 The New Yorker published an article about Hutto’s experience, it gave the book a second wind and resulted in the BBC film in 2011.

“Hutto’s work definitely shed new light on how turkeys operate as a community,” says Todd Witcher, executive director of Discover Life in America, the nonprofit that manages the Smokies All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory. “They are smart, adaptable, inquisitive, cooperative, and they have a great memory of geography and food sources.”

North America’s largest ground dwelling bird, turkeys evolved more than 11 million years ago and are related to other game birds like pheasants, quail, grouse, and partridges. There are five subspecies of turkeys, mostly differing in plumage and range. They have keen eyesight, are born with a certain knowledge of predators and landscape, and are vocal, gregarious animals.

An estimated 500 wild turkeys live in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, but the exact number is unknown according to Wildlife Technician Ryan Williamson. “The population does appear to be stable and healthy,” he says,



Keenly aware of the presence of predators, turkeys will reduce their gobbling and move considerable distances to elude hunters. COURTESY OF JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

“and seems to be growling every year based on the number of surviving poults seen along roadways.”

Male and female wild turkeys spend much of the year together in a flock. But in spring the males begin their “lek” or group-based breeding rituals.

“A dominant male will breed with his harem of hens and he will defend that position by fighting and a displaying behavior called strutting,” says William-

son. “During spring the males will gobble to announce their presence on the landscape and hens will call or ‘yelp’ to let males know that they are present in an area. The vocal chorus of their spring courtship is a truly spectacular piece of nature.”

Once bred, the female will lay an egg each day for 14 days and then incubate the eggs for 28 days until they all have hatched. The poults are raised by their

mother without any fraternal care. The male poults, or jakes, will generally be kicked out of the group the following spring by dominant gobblers.

“I marvel at seeing hens with poults in the late spring near our office at Twin Creeks Science and Education Center,” Witcher says. “They emerge from nesting with maybe ten babies. But the number goes down each week. It seems only about four to six can survive. They are most vulnerable during the time before they can fly.”

This strategy of producing larger numbers of offspring seems to ensure at least a few will make it to adulthood. Another survivalist tactic that turkeys have adopted is moving considerable distances to escape from hunters.

“It has also been documented that they will reduce their spring gobbling to near silence to elude hunting pressure,” says Williamson. “So, they are aware of the presence of predators and adjust accordingly to survive. I think there is a fair amount of intelligence in that.”

In the Florida panhandle, Hutto went to great lengths to learn to “talk turkey,” mastering what he calls “a language of not just 13 basic sounds that some experts had identified but many subdivisions within those categories of sound, a vocabulary of at least 50 different kinds of verbal instruction.”

If you enjoy watching turkeys and learning about their behavior, you can find “My Life as a Turkey” on YouTube. I like to watch it from time to time with that man who came into The Compleat Naturalist to talk turkey with me back in 2013. I married him and moved to his East Tennessee homestead which we share with black bear, white-tailed deer, coyote, and a variety of bird species, including a community of beautiful and intelligent wild turkeys.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

ACA enrollment steady despite court challenge, pandemic

Derek Lacey Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Affordable Care Act may be under review by the US Supreme Court, but it’s not stopping Western North Carolinians from signing up in droves.

Pisgah Legal Services has around 40 volunteers and staff members helping locals sign up for coverage under the ACA, says Health Justice Program Director Shannon Cornelius, and they’re busy enough that they’re currently booked out two weeks in advance.

There’s a big need, with many residents having lost health insurance due to the effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, but working remotely and more plan options for people to review among five providers in the marketplace is also a factor, she said.

“We are definitely more busy than in past years,” Cornelius said, but said they may be seeing the same number of clients while the remote process is just taking longer.

Enrollment numbers both locally and federally should be available soon, she added, and she assumes they’re high.

“Right now, the ACA is still the law, and open enrollment is happening,” said

Pisgah Legal Services Chief Operations Officer Jackie Kiger.

Cornelius and Kiger are urging people to get enrolled before the deadline Dec. 15, and note that anyone with questions can call Pisgah Legal Services for free help. Most of those coming in to get help enrolling either lost their health insurance or their employment due to the pandemic, Cornelius said.

“We want to make sure they can get it now and keep it,” no matter what the court decides, she said.

Many qualify for tax credits

Nationwide, more than 20 million people got coverage through the 10-year-old ACA last year, Kiger said, and more than 100 million are covered with the law’s provision protecting those with pre-existing conditions.

Last year, she said, local families who enrolled through the marketplace received an average \$744 tax credit to help with health insurance premiums.

“There’s a lot of impact here and a lot of financial support that comes in,” Kiger said. “And for individuals and families who are concerned, we urge them to contact Pisgah Legal Services.”

The court challenge alleges that the ACA, also called Obamacare, was rendered unconstitutional following legislation in 2017 that eliminated the financial penalty for not having health insurance, but kept in place the mandate that requires coverage, the AP reports.

The Supreme Court heard arguments on the case earlier this week, Kiger said, and she expects the court to announce its decision in spring of 2021.

“We have heard from a lot of people who have expressed concern or questions about what this case means, and about the law itself being in place,” she said.

‘Critical’ time to enroll

Kiger said she hopes the law is upheld and that Pisgah Legal Services’ analysis would indicate that even if it is struck down, those who enroll during the current open enrollment period should be able to maintain their health insurance through 2021 if they stay enrolled and keep up with premium payments.

“This is the one opportunity that people have to enroll for calendar year 2021 and have that peace of mind and

financial protection that comes with it,” she said.

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, “this is just an incredibly critical open enrollment period,” Kiger said.

Other organizations, like Mountain Projects, Blue Ridge Community Health Services and the Council on Aging are also offering free enrollment appointments, Cornelius said, reiterating that the most important thing is making sure people get enrolled before the Dec. 15 deadline.

“We can help people basically from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday,” she said. “It’s important they know free, unbiased help is available if they need assistance.”

Cornelius also noted the increased number of plan options available to consumers this year, with five providers in the marketplace, and said that people can get online and look at the options without submitting an application.

“They can shop around,” she said. “And if they have any questions, contact us and we can make an appointment.”

Those appointments are available at www.pisgahlegal.com, and at 828-210-3404, said Kiger, adding that all services are free and confidential.

Citizen Times

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Postal information

Citizen Times, USPS #236-000, ISSN #0336-0000, is published Monday through Sunday at 14 O. Henry Ave., Asheville, NC 28802. Periodicals postage paid at Asheville, NC 28802.
Postmaster: Send address changes to Customer Service, PO Box 62670, San Angelo, TX 76906.