

WILD TURKEY POULT MORTALITY IN NORTHEAST ALABAMA AS A RESULT OF SWIMMING

Eric C. Soehren and Steven J. Threlkeld

Identifying specific causes of mortality in Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) poults is important in understanding the dynamics of Wild Turkey populations, knowledge of which is critical for their successful management (Peoples et al. 1995). Although numerous studies have focused on poult mortality rates throughout the range of the Wild Turkey (Glidden and Austin 1975, Hon et al. 1978, Everett et al. 1980, Sisson et al. 1991), few have identified specific causes of poult mortality (Speake et al. 1985, Peoples et al. 1995). In those studies, Speake et al. (1985) and Peoples et al. (1995) reported predation, exposure, starvation, disease, flooding, and hatch defects as specific causes of mortality. Here, we report the first incidence of poult mortality caused by a combination of extreme exhaustion and prolonged exposure to water as a result of swimming.

On 14 June 2001 while running a Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) river route, four wild turkey poults were observed swimming across the Coosa River between St. Clair and Talladega counties, Alabama (33° 40' 17.9" N, 86° 09' 16.1" W). The poults were first observed swimming in a straight line from the north bank in St. Clair County to the south bank in Talladega County, a distance estimated to be approximately 250 m. Despite a strong cross-current, the poults were quite buoyant in the water and able to swim well enough to maintain a straight bearing. They swam by rapidly propelling their legs behind them with their wings closed, similar to the description made by Audubon (1831). While swimming they continually emitted high peeps. The poults were covered with natal down, except for partially developed remiges, and were estimated to be approximately two weeks old.

While we were studying the poults, a hen flew from the north bank directly over the poults and lit on an exposed limb on the south bank, about 4.5 m above ground level. After alighting on the limb, the hen began to call. The poults responded by peeping more rapidly and swimming directly toward the calling hen. As they reached the south side of the river, they immediately tried to climb the steep bank to reach level ground. However, the embankment was a 1.2 m vertical wall of slick mud which made climbing impossible. Unable to climb or fly from the water, the poults became noticeably exhausted. They

Indigo Bunting or a Blue Grosbeak, the reported records may represent but a small portion of the breeding population in the state. Birders in south central and western Alabama should be alert to the possibility of hearing or seeing this species.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Greg Jackson for his help with this manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- BURLEIGH, T. D. 1958. Georgia Birds, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- IMHOF, T. A. 1976. Alabama Birds. 2nd ed., University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.
- LOWTHER, P. E., S. M. LANYON AND C. W. THOMPSON. 1999. Painted Bunting (*Passerina ciris*) In The Birds of North America, No. 398 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.), The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- JACKSON, G. D. 2001. Distribution and frequency of occurrence charts. In A Birder's Guide to Alabama (J. F. Porter, Ed.). The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.
- TURCOTTE, W. H. AND D. L. WATTS. 1999. Birds of Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson.

Lawrence F. Gardella, 3547 Audubon Road, Montgomery, AL 36111. **Shawn Reed**, 823 Heather Dr., Prattville, AL 36066.