

PLATES FROM JOHN JAMES AUDUBON'S BIRDS OF AMERICA

4 Wild Turkey, female and young *Meleagris gallopavo* Linnaeus

Originally entitled 'Great American Hen and Young'

(PLATE VI)

Having commenced publication with the spectacular 'Wild Turkey, male', Audubon issued this engraving in the following part a few months later. 'Here you have his mate', he wrote, 'now converted into a kind and anxious parent, leading her young progeny, with measured step and watchful eye, through the intricacies of the forest. The chickens, still covered with down, are running among her feet in pursuit of insects. One is picking its sprouting plumelets, while another is ridding itself of a tick which has fastened upon its little wing.'

The young hatch after about twenty-eight days of incubation, and, when their distinctively patterned downy plumage is dry, are able to walk about with their mother seeking food, as shown in Audubon's plate. As the young approach full size the various family parties in a locality often band together into small flocks that wander together over a large area. Young birds appear not to breed in their first year, but wait until they are at least two years old.

After mating the female seeks a secluded spot where she makes a nest in a hollow on the ground, in which she will lay from eight to sixteen eggs. Audubon noted that 'Several hens sometimes associate together, I believe for their mutual safety, deposit their eggs in the same nest, and rear their broods together. I once found three sitting on forty-two eggs. In such cases, the common nest is always watched by one of the females...'

Whenever a single hen is obliged to leave her nest to forage for food, she carefully hides her eggs under a thick covering of leaves. 'Indeed', wrote Audubon, 'few Turkeys' nests are found, unless the female has been suddenly started from them, or a cunning Lynx, Fox, or Crow as sucked the eggs and left their shells scattered about.'

Among other predators, even turkey-cocks themselves have sometimes been known to destroy the nests of females with which they may even have mated. Audubon found that the hen, when laying or sitting, never moves except when certain of discovery: 'I have frequently approached within five or six paces of a nest, of which I was previously unaware, on assuming an air of carelessness, and whistling or talking to myself, the female remained undisturbed; whereas if I went cautiously towards it, she would never suffer me to approach within twenty paces, but would run off... to a distance of twenty or thirty yards, when assuming a stately gait, she would walk about deliberately, uttering every now and then a cluck.'

Audubon's illustrations of both male and female turkey are life size, showing how very much smaller and less prominently marked is the latter bird. The plate for 'Wild Turkey, female und young ' was based on a composition painted in 1820 during the artist's voyage down the Mississippi. Like 'Wild Turkey, male', it was originally engraved by W. H. Lizars in Edinburgh in 1826, when it was entitled the 'Great American Hen and Young'. In London the following year, Audubon's subsequent studies for both the habitat and the chicks were incorporated in to plate by the Robert Havells, making his one of the most elaborate subjects in *Birds of America*.