

Nature Thing – A Partridge in a Pear Tree

A Partridge in a Pear Tree...

and a turkey on the table. The holidays just wouldn't be the same without these birds and their fine feathered friends! While you're munching on the main course, be sure to give thanks for these fantastic fowl.

There's no birds like snow birds

Winter in Ohio can be tough on wildlife, with the average temperature below freezing, and snowfall ranging from two feet to nearly five feet across the state. After many of the dainty songbirds have flown south to their warm winter homes, the birds that stay behind have to be ready for the big chill!

Birds that are adapted to live in the woods through winter are built more for foraging in fields than for flying long distances. These upland game birds have heavy bodies, short rounded wings, and short bills. They stay close to the ground and build their cozy nests in shallow depressions in the soil, protected by heavy brush at the edge of the woods. Most are not colorful, so they are not easy for hungry predators to spot.

The ruffed grouse, bobwhite quail, and wild turkey are upland game birds that are native to Ohio. As the pioneers cleared the forests to build their farms, they created even better habitat for these woody birds. The gray partridge and ring-necked pheasant were brought here from Europe and Asia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Today, they feel very much at home in Ohio's woods and fields.

Yummy insects are summertime treats, but in the fall and winter, seeds and berries make a fine supper for hungry game birds. Their sturdy beaks and gizzards are well suited for the crunchy menu. Turkeys especially like nuts, and grouse love to munch buds on trees and bushes. Dried-out weeds in meadows provide seeds for quail, and leftover corn and soybeans in harvested farm fields are important food sources for pheasants. Partridges prefer smaller fare, like wheat and oats.

Birds of a feather flock together

Through the cold winter months, wild turkeys like to hang out in groups with one adult male and several adult females. Grouse do the same, but quail families get together to form a cozy covey for about a year, then go their separate ways in the spring.

Partridges take a different approach to family life. The male and female partridge stick together, year after year, and both parents tend to the chicks. The young stay with their parents for a full year until they move out of the nest. Partridges are such good parents that they will risk their own lives to lure predators a safe distance away from their nests. The mother partridge may pretend to be injured to distract the predator, while the father might try to scare it away.

Come spring, the male birds like to strut their stuff. Turkeys and pheasants fan their impressive feathers, while the grouse hops on a log and flaps his wings to make a drumming sound. The quail whistles a happy tune that sounds like "bob-bob-white" to attract a mate. The male partridge puffs up his chest to show off the handsome horseshoe shaped markings on his feathers.



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‘Tis the season

Game birds make more than the holiday menu merry. The partridge is a great choice for the star of the traditional holiday counting song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” It sits in the pear tree as the gift for the first day because the loving partridge parents symbolize the spirit of the season. Along with pinecones and berries, the fancy tail feathers of the turkey and pheasant have been used for generations to decorate evergreen branches that deck the halls this time of year.

It’s exciting to catch a glimpse of a turkey, pheasant, quail, grouse or partridge in the wintry landscape. With the leaves off the trees, it’s easier to see far into the woods. Be a track detective, and look for turkey tracks in the snow or soil. If you can spot the tracks, the turkey may still be close by.

Grab your warm coat and head out to a state park to see if you can spy our wonderful, wild, wintertime fowl!