



Ocellated turkey (Agriocharis ocellata) of southern Mexico, Belize and Guatemala, this one photographed at the Tikal Mayan ruins, Guatemala.

Ocellated Turkey

by Jerry Jennings
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Background

The new world family Meleagrididae (turkeys) is comprised of two species, the North American wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) of which there are seven subspecies distributed throughout the United States, northern and central Mexico, and the ocellated turkey (*Agriocharis ocellata*) which is monotypic and restricted in range to southern Mexico, Belize and Guatemala.

The family Meleagrididae was named by Linnaeus (1758) from the Latin *Meleagris*, the ancient Roman name for the Guinea fowl, with which the turkey was confused. The first turkeys seen in Europe were the domesticated form of the wild turkey, which the conquistadors found in Mexico during the Conquest. Oddly, these birds found their way into most of Europe via the Turkish Empire (hence the name). A trading partner of Spain at the time, Turkey controlled what is today Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece.

By the early 20th Century the wild turkey was nearly extirpated from New England and the eastern seaboard due to habitat destruction and hunting. Once numbering an estimated ten million birds, today it has been reduced to a tenth the number, though it is making a

comeback thanks to habitat restoration and restocking.

Status in the Wild

First discovered in 1920, the ocellated turkey has historically enjoyed a much narrower distribution than its North American cousin, and is limited to Belize (formerly British Honduras), Guatemala, and southern Mexico. Like its northern relative, the ocellated's habitat has suffered devastating destruction and it is still hunted for food, even though it is an endangered species. A more ominous threat to the ocellated's status is the fear of domestic poultry diseases, to which they are extremely susceptible and regularly exposed through frequent contact with free roaming village flocks throughout their range. It is not unusual to see ocellated turkeys, on occasion, scratching amidst poultry along the road. So pervasive are domestic fowl and their interactions with wildlife, that the author has even witnessed the elusive grey-necked wood rail (*Aramides cajanae*) among chickens on the edge of a village in Guatemala.

Ocellated turkeys are forest dwellers preferring woods punctuated with clearings. They forage almost exclusively on the ground for fruits, nuts, cactus fruits, grains, grass shoots, and

insects especially grasshoppers and spiders. At night they generally roost in trees.

During the breeding season males call and display their colorful plumage in an effort to attract as many hens as possible. Pair bonding is short lived and the hens do all the incubation.

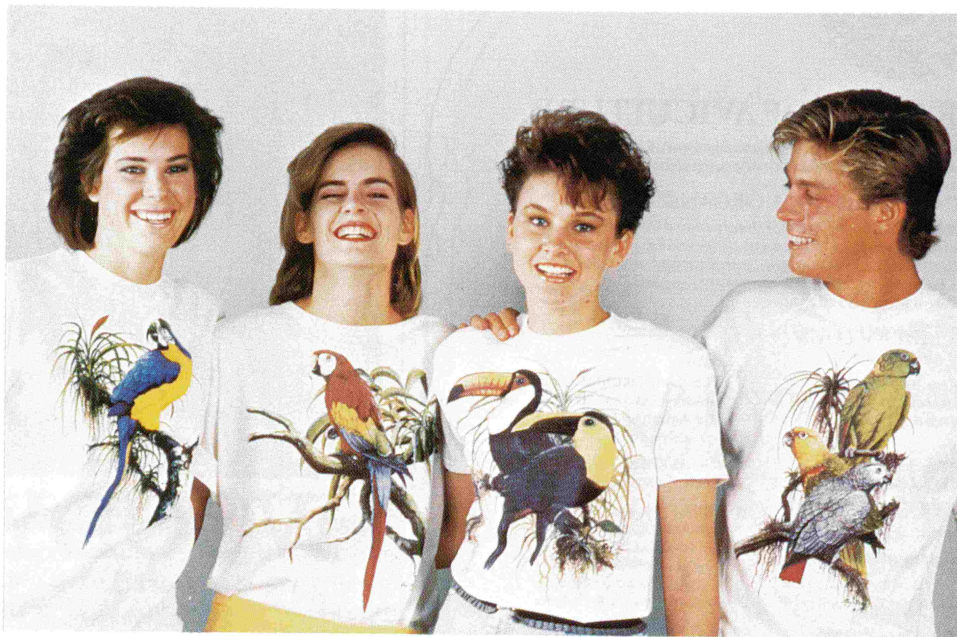
Ocellateds in Aviculture

The ocellated turkey first appeared in the United States in the 1930s. However, it was not until 1948 that it was bred for the first time in captivity — at the San Diego Zoo. According to Kenton C. Lint, then Curator of Birds at the zoo (Mr. Lint retired 12 years ago), three birds were acquired in 1946 from Dr. Newell in Guatemala. The lone male suffered from a bad leg and was unable to breed, though one of the hens laid twenty-one infertile eggs in 1947.

Not wishing to chance further failure, Dr. Frederick W. Lorenz, from the University of California at Davis, was brought in to attempt artificial insemination. Fortunately, he was successful and fourteen chicks were reared in 1948 — a first captive breeding. Over one hundred birds were reared in the following years and sent to zoos and private breeders throughout the U.S. Many of today's captive birds descend from this initial success, in part due to the numerous successful private breeding programs, such as that at Mickey Ollson's Wildlife World Zoo in Glendale, Arizona. Mr. Ollson acquired a pair of ocellated turkeys in the early sixties which produced 20 - 25 eggs a year for fifteen years.

Ocellated turkeys should be kept one pair to a flight for breeding. The hen will lay eight or more eggs per clutch in a shallow scrape on the ground, lining it with leaves and debris. If the eggs are removed (as they are laid) for artificial incubation, a pair is capable of producing up to twenty-five eggs per season. Since turkeys are precocial, they are able to walk and eat on their own at hatching. Ocellateds attain their full size in approximately one year, but males are not in full plumage until age two, when they are presumed sexually mature.

Ocellated turkeys are a slightly smaller but more colorful version of the wild turkey, with which Americans are more familiar. These delightful birds are kept by zoos and private aviculturists who are the gamebird connoisseurs. Given the endangered status of the ocellated turkey and its bleak future in the wild, aviculturists would do well to renew their interest and vigor in establishing breeding programs on behalf of this magnificent vanishing species. ●



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