

## **Wild Turkeys in Town**

Benjamin Franklin admired the North American wild turkey (*meleagris gallopavo*) so much that he wanted it to be our national bird. At one time the estimated number of wild turkeys in the United States was 10 million. Overhunting and destruction of the turkey's forest habitat caused their numbers to drop to 300,000 by the 1950s (found at that time mostly in southern states). Since then, the wild turkey has made a remarkable comeback due to conservation efforts and reintroduction.

A wild turkey stands 2-3 feet tall, weighs between 7 and 24 pounds, and has iridescent dark brown, gold, green and red feathers. It spreads its elegant tail feathers into a fan when it is courting or alarmed. Long legs propel it into sprints that have been clocked at 25-30 miles per hour. It spends most of its time on the ground in and near woods, foraging at dawn and dusk on its natural foods (nuts, acorns from mature oak trees, seeds, insects, frogs, snakes, spiders, and grasses). It roosts in trees at night to avoid its predators (bobcats, mountain lions, coyotes).

The turkey hen nests in a shallow depression on the ground or in thickets. When the poults (baby turkeys) are a month old they can fly up to roost in trees with their mother and her flock. At that age a pecking order among the poults has already been established. Young turkeys live with their mother and learn from her for four or five months. The wild turkey is a very social animal with a good memory. With luck, it may live 10-12 years.

### **Why is there a Problem?**

The wild turkey would lead a normal life within its natural habitat, its numbers kept in ecological balance with available food and natural predators, if nearby humans observed one cardinal rule:

**DON'T FEED WILD TURKEYS!**

Many perceived problems concerning wild turkeys are related to humans putting out food for what can soon grow to be a large flock. Wild turkeys do not need handouts from humans. Once turkeys are habituated to receiving supplemental food from humans, it is difficult to change their habits. Established habits of both birds and humans are hard to break!

Therefore, efforts to de-habituate wild turkeys must involve **EVERYONE – INCLUDING YOUR NEIGHBORS AND PEOPLE YOU NEVER MAY HAVE MET** who are buying birdseed or bags of corn and scattering it in their yard or in places where no one sees them. Some people may be allowing wild turkeys to pick up the spilled seed under their birdfeeders or be feeding turkeys their kitchen scraps. If wild turkeys are receiving food from someone in your area, it will make it much more difficult for the following suggestions to be effective. Nevertheless, here are some strategies to try. It's best to take action when the turkeys first show up.

1. Remove backyard bird feeders if turkeys have been eating spilled seed under them.
2. Turn on the water and with a hose direct a stream at the turkeys' feet.
3. Opening an umbrella will frighten turkeys if they seem not to be afraid of humans. So will chasing them with a broom.
4. Farmers have frightened away wild turkeys by flying predator kites from tall poles.
5. Garden supply stores sell iridescent reflector tape that can be tied to trellises, trees, and bushes and startle the turkeys. It flutters and glitters in the breeze. (Some people prevent songbirds from hitting their windows by attaching this same reflective tape from a string weighted with a small pinecone and hanging the string from the eaves in front of their windows.)

6. Metal poultry wire can be placed over berry bushes and fruit trees. Do not use polypropylene bird netting as it can entangle and trap nocturnal wildlife such as opossums and skunks. It's not easy to release a skunk trapped under bird netting!

7. Turkeys are very perceptive and notice changes in their habitat. Unusual objects (such as rope, boxes, balloons, reflector tape, an old fashioned "farmer John" scarecrow) placed in a garden and moved to new locations in the garden from time to time can alarm them.

8. Light up the roosting area with bright lights or install a motion sensitive sprinkler there.

9. If a turkey is pecking at a shiny object such as a vehicle or window, cover the object and chase the turkey away.

10. Do not use inhumane, sticky substances that trap wild creatures when they touch or step on the sticky substance. Wild creatures that become stuck sometimes tear off their own legs trying to escape. Sticky substances should not be used to deter turkeys or any other wildlife.

11. Install a motion sensitive sprinkler such as the Scarecrow (<https://www.contech-inc.com/products/animal-repellents/scarecrow-motion-activated-animal-deterrent>) or Spray Away in areas frequented by wild turkeys and activate it only during the day. It shoots out forceful squirts of water when turkeys pass near it. Keep in mind that other wildlife and pets may also set it off. Use it only as a last resort after trying all other methods of deterrence.

12. A dog **on a leash** will frighten turkeys away. Do not allow dogs to harm turkeys.

13. Request that your community make it illegal to feed wild turkeys.

– KEEP WILD TURKEYS WILD –

Problems arise when turkeys lose their fear of humans. This happens when they become accustomed to living in human habitat (with human-supplied food, highways, decks, parked cars, and railings). Prevent most problems by chasing them off and **NOT FEEDING THEM** when they first show up in your area.

Information courtesy of [www.creativecrittersolutions.org](http://www.creativecrittersolutions.org)