

TURKEYS IN OUR BACKYARD: KEEP THEM WILD!

By Sophie Bracinni

Long ago when all the animals talked like people, Turkey overheard a boy begging his sister for food. When Turkey heard this, he shook himself all over. Many kinds of fruits and wild food dropped out of his body, and the brother and sister ate these up. Like in this Apache legend, turkeys have always been associated with our nourishment and there is no question that Thanksgiving would be very meager without them. Yes, we love our turkeys, but not that much when flocks take over our decks and gardens.

Turkey are not indigenous to our coast of the Americas. Their natural habitat spread from the Canadian border to Mexico, but only in the East. They were imported here for top hunting game. Since then, they proliferated. According to wildlife biologist Gary Beeman, the population is growing extremely fast. There are natural predators to turkeys: bobcats, coyotes, mountain lions and golden eagles. Unfortunately, since turkeys are not native to California, these predators have not registered

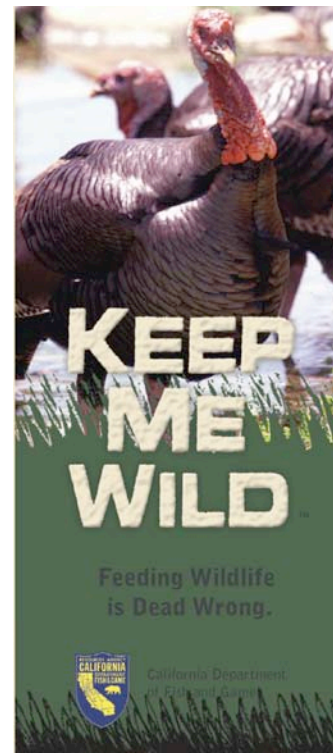
them on their prey chart. Beeman believes that they will learn.

Why is their presence a problem? Turkeys are omnivorous, just like raccoons. To some residents, they have become a nuisance; so much that a turkey was injured in Moraga recently. Sure, turkey hunting season is opened – for archery the spring hunting season started the last Saturday of March for 51 consecutive days – but it is authorized only with a hunting license and outside of city limits. So if you find yourself with a flock soiling or destroying your property, call the Department of Fish and Game – DFG - and ask for a depredation permit. The department will send someone to assess the situation and decide if the property damage is significant. In that case Beeman will be contacted.

Beeman holds a pest control license from the Department of Agriculture. If a depredation permit is issued, he will come and catch the turkeys. He has constructed a huge trap that can lure up to 10 turkeys at a time. After their

capture, the birds are killed. The turkeys taken under those conditions cannot be eaten. Beeman returns them to nature by disposing of them in remote EBMUD canyons where coyotes and vultures have learnt to recognize his truck and are waiting for the feed. Beeman covers all of Contra Costa County and gets called once or twice a week with a depredation permit.

Hunters will tell you that turkeys are great game. In the wild, they are very smart and allusive birds. They can fly, as high as 100 feet up and for 1/8 of a mile. But those are not the birds we see in our suburbs. The huge bird, member of the quail, grouse and pheasant family, is not afraid of humans anymore in areas where it is not hunted, like in Lamorinda. Some people have taken a liking to them and sometimes even feed them. Kyle Orr, Information Officer at the DFG warns us: "If wild animals have access to human food and garbage, they want more and more. They lose their natural fear of humans and can become aggressive." Orr's advice? "Keep them wild!"



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