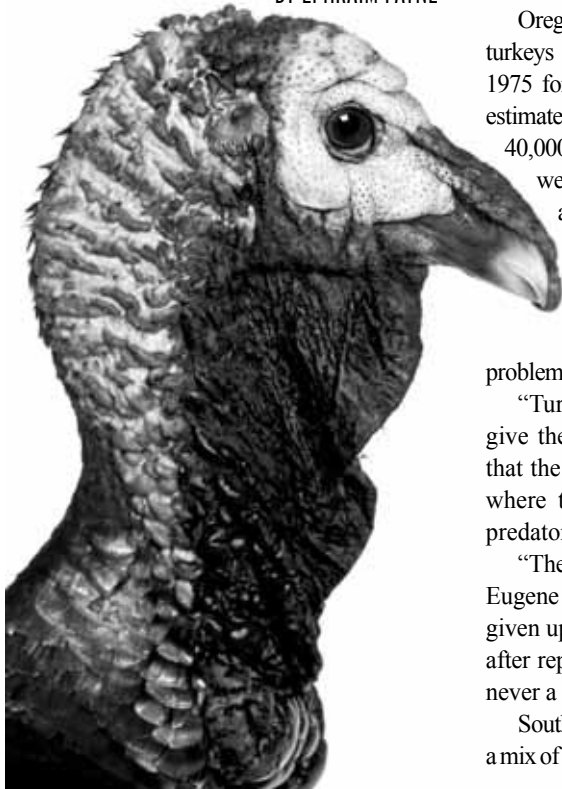


# DON'T FEED THE BIRDS

Wild turkeys are really feral  
BY EPHRAIM PAYNE



The Willamette Valley has a turkey of a dilemma. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) spent decades establishing nonnative turkeys in Oregon for sport hunting, yet the birds have become a nuisance throughout the region.

Wild turkeys rack up thousands of complaints each year and tens of thousands of dollars worth of property damages. Cities throughout the valley have had to take action: banning residents from feeding the voracious birds, trapping hundreds of birds a season and culling others.

Oregon started importing Merriam's turkeys in 1961 and Rio Grande turkeys in 1975 for hunting. Currently, ODFW officials estimate a stable statewide population of around 40,000 birds. Because most public land in western Oregon is densely forested, the agency planted birds on rural private property upon request. Biologists, says ODFW's Brian Wolfer, did not expect wild turkeys to adapt so readily to urban environments. But problems started cropping up in the mid-'90s.

"Turkeys are smarter than some people give them credit for," says Wolfer, adding that the easy living of urban environments, where the pickings are bountiful and the predators are not, attracts the birds.

"They're always around the house," says Eugene resident Karen Abbott, who has given up gardening on much of her property after replacing innumerable plants. "There's never a time we don't have one in our yard."

South hills neighborhoods like Abbott's — a mix of well-manicured housing developments

surrounded by grassy fields and stands of tall roost trees, filled with people eager to feed wildlife despite neighbors' complaints — are turkey Nirvana. Turkeys thrive on a mixed diet of succulent plants, nuts, insects, seeds (including those spilled from backyard bird feeders) and anything left out for deer.

Wolfer says that constant food supplies and low danger in urban environments cause turkeys to act differently than they do in areas where predation and dispersed food sources create small, mobile flocks. In neighborhoods like Abbott's, the flocks grow artificially large and stay put.

Flocks of 20 or more big birds can cause a lot of damage in a small area, uprooting landscaping and decimating garden beds. Sentry birds often perch on and damage roofs with their sharp claws. Turkeys perch on cars too, damaging paintjobs, and cover concrete paths and walkways with copious, tarry droppings that leave dark stains.

It can be hard to communicate the message that feeding turkeys does more harm than good. According to Veneta's community services director Brian Issa, after a recent article in that city's newsletter requesting residents quit feeding turkeys proved ineffective, city officials are crafting an anti-feeding ordinance and have started culling problem flocks.

ODFW gets more complaints from Eugene than from smaller cities like Veneta, Wolfer says. But because the complaint-to-population ratio is smaller in much larger Eugene, the city has yet to enact an anti-feeding ordinance, though city and ODFW officials have discussed the matter.

Other cities in the valley, including Corvallis, Dallas and Philomath, have resorted to culling permits and anti-feeding ordinances. People who feed birds in these cities not only risk neighborhood enmity and fines, they write virtual death warrants for the turkeys they attract.

The ODFW spends about \$15,000 each year trapping problem turkeys and moving them where they are wanted, says David Budeau, who heads ODFW's upland game bird program. But trapping is a measure of last resort, difficult in cities and, Wolfer adds, ineffective if people continue to feed the birds.

The agency estimates around 15,000 people statewide hunt the spring season, which started April 15, generating millions of dollars of economic activity. Hunting discourages turkeys from hunkering down in a location. A new fall hunt, which lets hunters harvest hen turkeys, can limit population growth in rural areas.

In cities, the agency urges people not to set up feeding stations or let birdseed scatter. Residents plagued by turkeys can install motion-activated sprinklers to douse and discourage them, or apply for free harassing permits from the agency.

Philomath Police Department Sgt. Ray Sytsma, who heads his town's bird culling effort, says the problem with turkeys is a people problem, not a wildlife problem, but it's the birds who pay dearly in the end.

"Once they rely on humans for food, they're a nuisance," says Sytsma, "and eventually someone is gonna kill 'em." ☹

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