

BIRDS

OF A FEATHER

On the hunt for Eugene's (not so) wild turkeys

BY RICK LEVIN

No less an enlightened American than Benjamin Franklin was royally pissed that the U.S. Congress, after six long years of deliberation, declared our national bird to be the bald eagle. Franklin, inventor of bifocals and the lightning rod, suggested a bird of a different feather altogether. In place of the dishonest, lazy raptor of "bad moral character" that is the bald eagle, this Founding Father suggested a fowl he deemed far less foul — the wild turkey.

The bald eagle, Franklin wrote to his daughter in January of 1784, was a "rank Coward," whereas Ben admired an avian that was "withal a true original Native of America," one that, although at times a tad "vain & silly," would remorselessly assault any British grenadier foolhardy enough to "invade his (the turkey's) Farm Yard with a red Coat on."

Vain, silly and, if you ask me, more than a little creepy, shifty and ominously dim-witted — which, in our devolving political climate, only further enhances the bird's emblematic status. Envision a gobbler on the flip side of a quarter, gun in one talon and foreclosure notice in the other: It's not so outrageous. I can't speak for bald eagles, but wild turkeys do seem to be an engrained, albeit oddly atavistic, element of the national scene. And here in Eugene, they've become as much a fact of life as hippies, hash and hula hoops. Wild turkeys own the streets. They've banded together and staked their hood, on their wattled way to celebrity status.

Just look at all the people taking pictures of them, like ad-hoc paparazzi of persistence and pluck.

For the better part of a month, I've been tracking an infamous gang of gobblers that has taken up residence in my West Eugene neighborhood. They make for strange neighbors — aloof, somewhat presumptuous, averse to backyard barbecues — but I have no serious beef with them; it's a free country, and Eugene has a long-standing tradition of tolerance. These turkeys, perhaps by proxy of the famous presidential turkey pardon, first appeared on my street shortly after Thanksgiving, slowly strutting single-file down the sidewalk like some lost regiment searching for its decimated westward outpost.

Maybe you've seen them: An undiminished rafter of five plump, plumed, polygamous Rio Grandes, two toms and three hens, whose zone of foraging is bound, roughly, to the east and west by Pearl and Chambers, respectively; north by 5th Avenue

and perhaps beyond, deep into the heart of the Whiteaker; and as far south, as one respondent claimed in an *EW* Facebook posting, "above Rockridge (in the) vicinity of 50th."

The first time I happened upon this gang of turkeys, I nearly shit my pants (and by "gang" I mean no disparagement, as it is an accepted term for a group of gobblers). I'd never seen anything like it — a clutch of winged zombie pinheads, shaped like upside-down question marks and somehow vulture-like in appearance, dark and reptilian and as out of place as a manatee in Montana. Having grown up in a rural hamlet on Washington's Key Peninsula before moving in third grade to Minneapolis, eventually ending up Seattle, I'd encountered everything from deer, pheasant, bald eagles, orca, otters and brown bear in the wild, not to mention those unlikely nocturnal creatures that thrive in urban grit, possum and raccoons.

attempt to establish wild populations," Budeau says. "Many of the wild turkeys that we now have stemmed from releases in the 1970s of wild-trapped Rio Grande turkeys."

The transplant took.

My own research into Eugene's wild turkey phenomenon, largely anecdotal and not remotely scientific, involved reading up on the bird, perusing statistical data and, more immediately, tracking them down and observing their behavior. I'm sad to report that the most salient thing I can say about tracking, following and bird watching wild turkeys for any length of time is this: They are boring.

Like cows, they are easily spooked, and when they aren't just standing around, they move slowly. I tried to trick my photographer into getting attacked by sending him into an enclosed space to get a good picture — no go. Like sex,



PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

But turkeys? Five of them, jaywalking, orderly and unflappably, almost arrogantly, across 11th and Polk, like the Beatles crossing Abbey Road? Here we enter the dimension of humming monoliths and Log Ladies, a Lynch-like scene of urbanity that alerts neural anomalies. As another Facebook wild-turkey respondent said about first seeing them in Eugene: "I thought I was f@#king crazy."

Nope — not crazy. Though wild turkeys are not native to Oregon, their presence here is no mystery or preternatural zone-slippage. In fact, according to Dave Budeau, upland game bird coordinator with Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, the first release of these birds into Oregon habitats dates back to at least the late-1800s. "Many releases were domestically raised birds that did not fare well in the wild and eventually disappeared," Budeau says.

Turkeys, however, make for good viewing and hunting, so hardier breeds of wild turkeys, such as Rio Grandes from Texas and Merriam's turkeys from the southwest, "were trapped in other states and released into Oregon in an

celebrity and the Super Bowl, it is way more exciting anticipating them than finding them.

In fact, the single most dramatic turkey-related event I witnessed was the a young woman with a dog walked into heavy rush hour traffic along W. 11th, stopped in the middle of the street and held up her hand to stop the onslaught of cars as the turkeys crossed the road. So I can't tell you why the turkey crossed the road, but I can tell you how. And, for me, the most amazing thing about these five, apparently stupid-beyond-Darwinian-fittest-survival birds is that, minus such foolhardy human intervention, their numbers have not diminished. Five arrived. Five remain. Go figure.

"Turkeys do have very keen senses," ODFW's Budeau says. "They have excellent eyesight and can hear well, so they are not dumb in that respect. In the wild, they use these senses to reduce the likelihood of becoming prey. In town, they can use these same senses to increase their survival." That said, Budeau admits that "turkeys certainly can be struck by cars, so it is a bit surprising that none of them

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