

have been lost if they are constantly crossing traffic. They may have been just lucky to date.”

So let's talk turkey: Despite the Northwest's preponderance of deer and elk hunters, turkey hunting is the fastest growing type of hunting nationwide, and Oregon is no slouch when it comes to the number of folks trying to wing a gobbler (most commonly with shotguns or bow-and-arrows). According to ODFW management numbers for the 2011 spring wild turkey harvest, there were 14,389 registered hunters who, averaging nearly four days of hunting apiece, bagged a total of 4,132 birds, meaning just about one in four hunters nailed a turkey.

And get this: assuming Oregon wild turkey hunters hew to the national average for hunting expenses, the state's 2003 spring wild turkey season (14,152 hunters) generated somewhere around \$11 million, with more than \$412,000 of that coming just from tag sales. To say nothing of the money coming in from so-called non-consumptive wildlife activities like bird watching and picture taking — gas, equipment, film, cameras — which, for instance, a U.S. Dept. of the Interior 1998 estimate puts at \$693 million spent in Oregon alone.

Budeau says Oregon's wild turkey population appears to be stable for now, with between 40,000 and 50,000 of the things roaming the state. “Most of these turkeys would be considered truly wild, and live in natural habitat with very little contact with people.” It's illegal to hunt turkeys in the city — even with a knife, Budeau says — so maybe the gangs that show up here ain't so stupid after all.

Wild turkeys are known as habitat generalists with a highly adaptable “cosmopolitan” diet that allows them to thrive in a variety of settings. They also “domesticate or tame easily,” Budeau says, especially when “well-meaning folks” intentionally place snacks out for the birds. So there you have it: “Food,” Budeau says. “That is the simplest answer as to why the turkeys end up in our urban or suburban areas.”

And even when folks don't purposely feed the birds, he says, “urban/suburban areas still offer numerous food resources” ranging from pet food to wild berries and home gardens.

“In most areas this is not a problem,” Budeau explains, but in the Willamette Valley, which sports the state's densest human population, “it is more common for turkeys to encounter humans and the food resources associated with them. There is simply more opportunity for wild turkeys to interact with humans and become hooked on the easy food resources.”

Hooked, like junkies. Heroin is notoriously difficult to kick, which may explain why our five feathered friends are reluctant to return to the wild: Who wants to go cold turkey? Who wants to trade cat food, crosswalks and local celebrity for the sodden Hobbesian hell of foraging grubs and berries when, at any time, in the wobble of wattle, some asshole in an orange vest could end you with one squeeze of the trigger?

There was a stretch of days, maybe six or seven in a row, when it seemed I couldn't step outside without stumbling across Eugene's gang of (not so) wild turkeys; they were the talk of the town; my friends and I started texting each other cell-phone snaps of our latest wild turkey encounters. But the day I went out looking for them, photographer in tow, scouring the city, asking passers-by (few of whom weren't immediately aware of what we were asking), posting a call for turkey-sightings on Facebook, making turkey calls — nothing. “There are always some up by Dan Neal's house running by the water tank. They look delicious,” said one posting. “They have been told to stay away from my trees,” said another, while others had us running from Chavez Elementary to Broadway downtown and then back to Monroe Park.

It took a full 24 hours of intermittent hunting and pecking before, by chance, I was out walking my dog when I spotted them on Polk heading west down the W. 10th alley. We cornered them in someone's back yard, penned on three sides by a tall fence, pecking around or standing motionless, giving us the sideways eyeball.

What sort of damage might those turkeys have been causing in that backyard? We spotted a single, cylindrical turkey turd, tinted somewhere between mauve and babyshit brown, if this can be considered damage, but other than that there appeared no serious carnage. According to ODWF, during a two-year period between January 2002, and December 2003, homeowners filed 284 turkey-related damage complaints, with a combined estimated financial loss of \$25,792.

Budeau says wild turkeys are capable of messing up flowerbeds and gardens. “They often forage by scratching the ground with their feet in an attempt to expose seeds or other food items,” he says, which “can damage flowers or crops.” Budeau suggests several methods for discouraging wild turkey tomfoolery, including removing artificial outdoor food sources like bird feeders or pet food, installing motion-activated sprinklers, “shiny objects blowing in the wind,” fencing, dogs as well as raking fallen nuts and fruit from your yard.

Also, though Budeau didn't directly recommend this, it might help if the turkey paparazzi, a la Lindsay Lohan, got a bit more aggressive. “I guarantee that if every person with a camera frightened and chased after the turkeys, it would not take those turkeys long to recognize a camera-toting person as a possible threat,” he says, “and they would do everything possible to avoid photographers.”

Imagine a gang of five turkeys skulking around the Bermuda Triangle, going incognito in hoodies and sunglasses. Or better yet, taking a clue from Russell Crowe and going ballistic, charging you balls-to-the-wall and pecking out your Nikon lens.

“In general, turkeys are not dangerous, and usually are not aggressive toward people,” Budeau tells me. “However, they are large birds and can be intimidating, and almost every year there are reports of turkeys, usually adult males, chasing people or attacking cars. I am not aware of any serious injuries caused directly by a turkey.” **EW**

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