



Wildlife Damage Management Program

Nuisance Turkeys

21810



Photo by Cal Gunnick

Once extirpated from Minnesota, wild turkey restoration has been a phenomenal success. Today's turkey population descended from a successful release of turkeys that occurred between 1971 and 1973 when 29 adult wild turkeys were trapped in Missouri and transplanted to Houston County in extreme southeastern Minnesota. Since this modest beginning over 30 years ago, Minnesota's population has grown to more than 70,000 wild turkeys.

Wild turkeys are active during the day and roost in trees overnight. They nest on the ground and the young turkeys (poults) are able to leave the nest shortly after hatching. They immediately begin foraging for insects, but stay in a brood with the hen until their flight feathers have developed. Because turkeys are large and active during daylight hours, they are often observed foraging for insects, grubs and seeds, their primary food source. However, since they are highly visible, they have sometimes been blamed for crop damage that has actually been caused by other animals such as deer, raccoons, squirrels or blackbirds. Studies in Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio have concluded that turkeys seen in crop fields eat mainly waste grain and rarely cause significant crop damage. Instead, they can benefit farmers by eating insects and weed seeds.

As both the human and turkey populations expand in Minnesota it is only natural to expect that increasing interactions will occur, some of them negative. Some wild turkeys that reside in urban areas have become acclimated to humans, which can create problems. Compounding the problem is the illegal practice of raising and releasing turkeys. Although well intentioned, people who release pen-reared turkeys are doing more harm than good. Pen-reared birds pose a potential disease threat to the wild turkey population, as well as other domestic poultry. They are also not wary of humans and may become a nuisance by roosting on roofs, in trees near homes, and on decks, and they are known to occasionally damage painted automotive surfaces. Some turkeys, usually the yearling males (jakes), may also become aggressive and chase homeowners, children and pets. If this behavior persists, these birds may need to be removed and destroyed by special permit. Tame turkeys are counter to the wild turkey restoration effort and are not typical of the wily behavior necessary for long-term survival of the largest of North American game birds.

At first, the appearance of turkeys is usually novel and welcome. Property owners often regrettably feed the birds to encourage them to stay. It is only after the droppings accumulate, property is damaged, or residents are chased by aggressive jakes that they are considered a nuisance.

To avoid the common problems of nuisance turkeys take the following steps:

- **DON'T RAISE AND RELEASE TURKEYS.**
- **DON'T FEED TURKEYS.** Keep wild things wild! Feeding, whether direct or indirect, can cause turkeys to act tame and may lead to bold or aggressive behavior, especially in the breeding season.
- **KEEP BIRD FEEDER AREAS CLEAN.** Use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground, as the seed attracts turkeys and other wild animals. Clean up spilled seed from other types of feeders daily. Temporarily discontinue feeding birds if turkeys are a nuisance. Remove feeders in the spring, as there is plenty of natural food available for all birds.
- Do not allow turkeys to be comfortable in the presence of people; chase turkeys away from your residence. **DON'T LET TURKEYS INTIMIDATE YOU** Don't hesitate to scare or threaten a bold, aggressive turkey with loud noises, swatting with a broom or water sprayed from a hose. A dog on a leash is also an effective deterrent.
- **COVER WINDOWS OR OTHER REFLECTIVE OBJECTS** If a turkey is pecking at a shiny object such as a vehicle or window, cover or otherwise disguise the object. Harass the bird by chasing it, squirting with a hose or other means of aggression.

- **PROTECT YOUR GARDENS AND CROPS** You can harass turkeys searching for food in your gardens. Dogs tethered on a run can also be effective in scaring turkeys away from gardens. Netting is another option to employ. In agricultural situations, some scare devices are effective. Motion activated sprinklers are available which can sometimes be effective.
- **EDUCATE YOUR NEIGHBORS** Pass this information along: Your efforts will be futile if neighbors are providing food for turkeys or neglecting to act boldly towards the birds. It requires the efforts of the entire neighborhood to help keep wild turkeys wild. Turkeys are important and valuable birds in Minnesota. They are classified as game birds for which regulated hunting seasons and management programs have been established. If you are experiencing problems with turkeys or have any questions regarding them, contact your nearest DNR Area Wildlife Office: www.dnr.state.mn.us/wildlife/index.html or contact the DNR Information Center at 888-646-6367 for additional advice on dealing with these birds.

AGGRESSIVE TURKEYS

Remember that wild turkeys have a "pecking order" and that habituated birds may respond to you as they do to another turkey. The best defense against aggressive or persistent turkeys is to prevent the birds from becoming habituated in the first place by being bold to them. Everyone in the neighborhood must do the same; it will be ineffective if you do so only on your property. Each and every turkey must view all humans as dominant in the pecking order and respond to them as superiors rather than subjects. Habituated turkeys may attempt to dominate or attack people that the birds view as subordinates.

Adult humans may drive off or deter these aggressive birds with bold action by forcefully fending them off with brooms or other non-injurious implements. However, the turkey may then recognize that individual as dominant but continue to respond to other people as subordinates.

- Turkeys which repeatedly challenge or attack children or elderly persons or otherwise threaten public safety may ultimately have to be destroyed. Keep turkeys wild to avoid these consequences.
- Trapping and relocating "nuisance" turkeys is not an option. The methods used to trap turkeys in remote areas are often impractical or ineffective in urban or suburban areas due to safety or disturbance. Released turkeys may also continue their inappropriate actions where they are released or may move substantial distances to other suburban sites.

TURKEYS IN TRAFFIC

Some wild turkeys, especially in spring and early summer, choose to stand, walk, or pace back-and-forth in the center of busy highways, dodging vehicles and blocking traffic. Some (but not all) of these birds are juvenile males and often do not strut or display. The reasons for this peculiar behavior are unknown.

- "Highway" turkeys are not easily dispersed, if at all. If a hazardous situation exists, and the birds do not soon disperse on their own, they may have to be forcibly removed.



Photo by Bryan Lueth