

## AGGRESSIVE TURKEYS

Remember: wild turkeys have a pecking order and 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 if the aggressive human behavior is not employed by all. Turkeys who repeatedly challenge or attack may end up being killed by the state. **Keep turkeys wild to avoid these dire consequences.**

It is rarely an option to trap and relocate "nuisance" turkeys. 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 & 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 removed and relocated.

## 5 BASIC DO'S AND DON'TS - A RECAP

❶ **DON'T FEED WILD TURKEYS.** Keep the wild in wildlife! Never deliberately feed wild turkeys to attract them to your property or to keep them around. Turkeys can survive very well on natural foods and do not need handouts from people. Turkeys who become accustomed to humans and human-associated foods are likely to lose their fear of people. The birds are then

placed in jeopardy when you or your neighbors become afraid of them or seek to stop any damage they may cause. Feeding, whether direct or indirect, can cause turkeys to act tame and may lead to bold or aggressive behavior, especially in the breeding season.

❷ **DO REMOVE OR SECURE ALL POTENTIAL SOURCES OF FOOD.** Don't tempt or attract wild turkeys by allowing them to feed on seeds which have spilled from your bird feeders. If these seeds are accessible to turkeys, they will readily feed upon them. This food source will have the same effect as if you deliberately fed them. Clean up

spilled bird seed each day. Preferably, use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground. Temporarily discontinue feeding birds if necessary. Remove feeders in the spring and summer, as there is plenty of natural food available for all birds.

❸ **DON'T ALLOW TURKEYS TO BECOME HABITUATED TO PEOPLE.** Wild turkeys that become conditioned to human foods, and habituated to people, are likely to cause damage or attempt to dominate people. Once this behavior is established, it can be very difficult or impossible to change. 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. Be sure to be bold around turkeys—especially when they first show up in an area—and encourage others in the neighborhood to be the same.

❹ **DO 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 her, squirting with a hose or some other means of aggressive behavior.

❺ **DO 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.

 Animal Protection League of NEW JERSEY  
PO Box 174  
Englishtown, NJ 07726  
732-446-6808  
www.APLNJ.org

*Excerpted in part from MA Division of Fisheries and Wildlife,  
1 Rabbit Hill Rd, Westborough, MA 01581*

# Preventing Conflicts With Wild Turkeys



**TURKEYS IN SUBURBIA  
UNDERSTANDING THEIR BEHAVIOR  
APPROACHES FOR COEXISTENCE**

**LIVING WITH WILDLIFE SERIES**

## TURKEY BEHAVIOR

Wild turkeys are social birds. They live in flocks—sometimes rather large—which are organized by "pecking order." This pecking order is a social hierarchy or ranking in which each bird is dominant over or "pecks on" birds of lesser social status. Males and females each have their own pecking order, and same-sex flocks have their own internal pecking orders. All turkeys in the flock share the same area, but not the same privileges. For example, dominant males typically do all the mating, with juvenile males rarely getting the opportunity.

Turkeys are not territorial and do not defend an area against other turkeys of the same sex. Territorial birds cannot discern individuals, but rather respond to certain visual cues. On the other hand, turkeys, birds with a pecking order, must recognize and remember specific individuals to know their place, and that of others, in the hierarchy. Thus, turkeys may "know" many others and must remember these individuals for several months.

Similarly, human-imprinted turkeys (those who have formed an indelible social and mental bond with humans upon birth) recognize and respond to people by both voice and appearance. The turkeys will also assign a sex to people, based upon the bird's perception of the human's behavior rather than their actual sex, and behave towards that person accordingly, for an indefinite period.

Young turkeys remain with their mother for a rather long period, up to 4 to 5 months, and females may remain even longer. This long



association is undoubtedly an essential learning process. Turkeys also learn from each other, often by imitation, and, by associating with older more experienced birds, learn and remember the layout of their home ranges and the location of various food sources.

All these behaviors have implications for perceived "nuisances" when turkeys come in contact with humans. It is likely—although not conclusively demonstrated—that wild turkeys who have become habituated to people react to them as do

human-imprinted birds. That is, these tame-acting birds appear to incorporate people, especially familiar individuals, into their pecking order and treat them accordingly.

If they view someone as dominant, the turkeys will be deferent or fearful, while if the person is seen as subordinate

he or she will be bullied. Humans perceived as males may be threatened or challenged by adult males, especially in spring, or may be followed and called at by the females. Humans viewed as female may be displayed to or followed. The same person may be viewed as "male" by one turkey and "female" by another, confounding a response by the person who lacks an understanding of turkey behavior.

## PROTECTING GARDENS

Removing food sources is critical, hence preventing turkeys from having access to gardens is key. Polypropylene bird netting is often used to protect fruit trees, berry bushes, shrubs, and home vegetable gardens. Some types of ultraviolet-stabilized netting last up to 20 years.

Reflective colorful "flash tape" can be attached to stakes, tree limbs, or trellises. The tape reflects sunlight and flutters and twinkles in the wind. Some brands have holographic images which flash dramatically.

Motion-activated scarecrows connected to water sprinklers have been used to repel dogs, raccoons, and large birds from gardens. One scarecrow covers an area up to 1,000 square feet.

Dogs tethered on a long leash which slides back and forth on a cable can be effective in chasing turkeys away from gardens and other home situations.

Turkeys will recognize changes in their immediate surroundings. Once they are accustomed to an area, they may be frightened by changes in its appearance. When rocket-netting turkeys, biologists have found that the net's wire must be concealed in order not to alarm the birds. Rope, thick wire, or unusual objects placed in or around a garden may serve the same effect. These objects should be moved around frequently to obtain the best deterrent effect.

## HOW TO DETER ROOSTING TURKEYS

Wild turkeys are active in the daytime. They roost in trees at night to avoid ground predators. They usually select the largest trees available and often roost as high as possible. Roost sites may reflect topography—to allow turkeys easy access and a clear view—or weather conditions—to provide shelter from harsh weather. In suburban areas, where turkeys have become habituated to people, it is not uncommon for turkeys to roost on railings, roofs, or sometimes on vehicles.



Rows of "bird spikes" are often used to deter blackbirds, gulls, or pigeons from roosting on the ridgetops of building and are potentially effective in deterring turkeys from the same behavior.

"Jumping" bird training devices are sometimes placed on roofs or roosts to deter and train birds to roost elsewhere. When the roosting bird contacts the device, it "jumps" in the direction of the contact, frightening the bird.

## TURKEYS PECKING AT SHINY OBJECTS

Because wild turkeys have a pecking order, they may respond aggressively to reflections or images

of turkeys. Turkeys may not recognize their own image, hence, they will respond to a reflection as they would an intruding turkey. Human-habituated wild turkeys have been known to peck at windows, automobile mirrors, or reflections in shiny surfaces (such as polished car doors). Since the stimulus to drive away or subjugate the intruder is a strong one, and since the reflection does not disappear or cower when the turkey confronts it, the bird will often continually display

towards or attack the reflection until changing light conditions cause it to vanish. The turkey will often remember the intruder and return to the same spot and continue the behavior even if repeatedly chased off.

The reflectivity of the window, vehicle, or other shiny object must be changed or covered up in some fashion in order to stop the turkey from pecking at it.

Assertive dogs, on a leash, can be effective in keeping turkeys away from a location. In fenced areas, dogs may be allowed to roam free and chase away turkeys at will.