

What's Up with the Davis Wild Turkey Flock? (WTF)

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WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote this piece for my UWP 104C Journalism class with Professor Miller. Having been assigned a long feature article on something relevant and local, I decided to write about the Davis turkey situation. In this article, I explain how the wild turkeys came to exist in Davis and how the City has attempted to curb their numbers. We have one particular turkey, known as "Downtown Tom," who has attained celebrity status within the community thanks to his particularly aggressive temperament. Arguably an invasive species, the Davis turkeys have prompted numerous 911 calls and terrified attempts at umbrella-driven self-defense. Be on your guard; don't let our avian overlords scare you into submission.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Maxine Mulvey's feature article on Davis's wild turkey problem reads so smoothly that it's easy to miss how much work went into its construction. This, of course, is a measure of much of the best journalism writing. Readers emerge from her essay with a full sense of the Davis turkey conundrum: the backstory, the contentious present, the possible futures. While she captures the complexity of the situation, Maxine has chosen to emphasize its inherent absurdity. The result honors the ancient precept to instruct and delight. In subsequent classes I have used Maxine's essay as a model for my open-topic feature article assignment. Indeed, students find much to emulate and to enjoy. They note the author's strong lead and conclusion; her many strategies for engaging the reader; her use of Downtown Tom as a unifying central character; her precise vocabulary and vivid description; her brisk organization, aided by particularly strong transitions;

and her sense of humor, which couldn't come off without Maxine's admirable grasp of the fundamentals.

— *Gregory Miller, University Writing Program*

Have you seen Downtown Tom? The famous “aggressive turkey” has been terrorizing Davis residents in past months. Though he has been predominantly sighted in downtown Davis, Tom has since “gone rogue.” The City of Davis no longer knows the whereabouts of this poultrous villain.

Claims that Downtown Tom has “bullied” local residents have led to signs being posted around central Davis warning passersby about the belligerent bird. But Downtown Tom is just one of the approximately 80 adult turkeys that currently reside in Davis. The flock has grown exponentially in the last 10 years.

Nine turkeys were first observed in Davis around the city’s cemetery in May 2006. While the birds were initially harmless, locals feeding the turkeys led them to associate humans with food and “chase down” anyone who came into contact with them. In 2008, City of Davis Wildlife Resource Specialist John McNerney created the Wild Turkey Management Plan, which, so far at least, has had little success.

McNerney’s plan recommended community “education and outreach,” teaching locals how to peacefully coexist with wild turkeys and not feed them. The plan also proposed “monitoring turkey behavior” and forcefully removing especially “aggressive individuals.”

“Do not feed” literature,” was distributed via “community events and discussions, newspaper articles, social media, and residential calls and visits.” Even as Davis residents were urged not to feed turkeys either directly or indirectly, turkeys have been shown to obtain food in roundabout ways, such as through birdfeeders. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of these outreach efforts is difficult to track.

Local feeding behavior has probably changed since the 2008 plan was implemented, though city officials cannot be sure. What’s for certain is that the turkeys are still being fed, both directly by residents and indirectly as in the case of birdfeeders. As of now, no turkeys have been removed from the community.

Populations have spiked since wild turkeys first came to Davis, especially since 2010, when there was an average of 20 adult birds—a

quarter of the estimated population today. This is thanks in part to turkeys' precocious young—turkeys are born sighted and feathered, and therefore leave their nests soon after birth. In terms of solving turkeys' community disruption, locals are primarily concerned about public safety, property damage, cost, and avoiding animal cruelty.

On October 26, according to the *Sacramento Bee*, the Davis City Council voted in favor of a new turkey management plan of which Downtown Tom “could be the first casualty.”

The newly implemented Wild Turkey Population Management Plan is a revival of the 2008 plan, adjusted according to new information and community input. Costlier and more intensive, the plan has four parts: ensuring people don't feed turkeys, encouraging natural predation, “selective lethal removal” of especially disruptive turkeys, and relocation.

At about \$1,500 annually, lethal removal is the cheapest option. This approach is widely unpopular, however, since Davis is a very animal-friendly town.

Community education is the least invasive option, but it may not be very effective. Providing people with information about how to coexist with turkeys would not solve the issue of their increased population and subsequent destructive behavior.

Relocation is not cheap either—\$15,000 the first year and \$6,500 each subsequent year. Relocation also requires trapping, which is labor-intensive. This method failed in 2007 when staff at the Davis Cemetery asked the Wild Turkey Federation (WTF) to relocate an aggressive male turkey. There were more problems in 2009-10 when the City and WTF observed “trap shyness” and consequently made no more trapping attempts. However, relocation would beneficially remove a significant portion of the turkey population without removing the entire flock. It therefore serves as a compromise between those who like having turkeys around and those who don't.

Outside of these four options included in the approved plan, three more management methods were considered: sterilization, nest disruption, and food bank harvesting.

At an initial cost of \$30,000, sterilization is incredibly expensive. Putting aside the financial issue, sterilization would do nothing to improve the current turkey situation as the effects of sterilization would take a few generations to appear.

Nest disruption would entail “oiling eggs to stop development”

and “removing nests prior to egg laying,” and would have to occur in spring during mating season. However, nest disruption is illegal, as well as harvesting turkeys for food banks, so both of these options were automatically highly improbable. What is happening already is community outreach and education.

On Nov. 16, McNerney spoke at the Explorit Science Center on 5th Street to discuss the plan’s implications with community members.

McNerney began with an informative rundown on turkey characteristics and behavior, both generally and specific to California.

“Who are these birds?”

Scientifically known as *Meleagris gallopavo*, turkeys are literally named “Guinea fowl chicken-peacocks.” Apparently whichever bewildered explorer came up with this title had no idea what he was looking at.

It is this odd appearance that makes turkeys so noticeable. McNerney acknowledged turkeys’ bizarre, distinctive appearance.

“It’s hard to miss a turkey,” he admits, squatting down and bending his arms to mimic a squabbling turkey. But not everyone is so willing to coexist with these feathered peculiarities.

Opinions differ widely on the Davis turkey infestation: antagonistic, passive, benevolent. One woman at McNerney’s event was particularly livid.

“I had 37 turkeys in my front yard yesterday . . . they cause hellacious problems. They are on our solar panels. They are on our car. They tear up the garden. They scare the kids. They poop all over.”

She is shocked by what she sees as the City’s indifference to these invasive birds who, she maintains, are no less of a threat than other, more demonized animals.

“If we had 37 coyotes in our front yard the City would freak out. If we had 37 rats in our front yard the City would freak out.” She was referring to an incident that occurred in Davis back in 2010.

Six years ago, the federal government fatally shot a family of peaceful coyotes on a Davis golf course without so much as notifying city residents. There was a complete lack of communication between local officials and Davisites. The Council has since shifted away from this policy as it didn’t “fit the values of the community.” But a decreasing coyote population has conversely aided the growth of local turkey populations. The 2010 Coyote Management Coexistence Plan, preceded

by the 2008 Wild Turkey Management Plan, helped to ease the pain of a betrayed community.

The City's drastically different approach to solving Davis' turkey situation has some residents baffled. Turkeys are arguably more destructive than coyotes, who for the most part remain harmless. The meeting attendee with 37 turkeys in her yard was eager to solve the problem herself.

"Is it possible then for people to get a depredation permit and kill the turkeys when they're on your land?" she mused.

"You can't shoot them," McNerney responded, "because they're in city limits."

"And it [would be] inhumane and psychotic," said another concerned resident.

The Wild Turkey Population Management Plan aims to reconcile these contrasting viewpoints in order to satisfy a majority of people. It is important to remember that turkeys are not entirely nuisances but actually have benefits for their human neighbors.

McNerney pointed out that turkeys directly benefit people: they are "fun to watch," they eat pests, and they fertilize soil with their feces. However, such benefits are largely overshadowed by the inconvenience turkeys pose for Davis residents. No one likes having to stop their car in the middle of the road while a flock of turkeys crosses the street. And such disturbances are more than inconvenient—they can cause real danger.

A car that has to stop suddenly for a turkey crossing the street could potentially hit the turkey and could also endanger the vehicles behind it. So whether it is one turkey or an entire flock in the road, the risks for car accidents are about the same. Until such real concerns have been resolved by the newly implemented Wild Turkey Population Management Plan, however, there are some things that Davis residents can do to safely coexist.

Above all, don't feed wild turkeys. At least temporarily, get rid of less obvious food sources like birdfeeders. As opportunistic birds, turkeys will eat just about anything, which makes them hard to deter from residential neighborhoods. Feeding wild turkeys also may make them become too comfortable around people they would have otherwise avoided.

The City of Davis has warned residents that a few turkeys can grow to a flock if they "lose their natural fear of humans." Turkeys are nomadic and will therefore leave an area if there is not a reliable source of food.

McNerney also advised locals to spray turkeys with a high-pressure hose if they enter one's yard; the same effect may be derived from motion-sensitive sprinklers. If you encounter a wild turkey while you are not at home, you can intimidate the turkey by opening an umbrella towards it.

We will see in the coming year whether the new Turkey Management Plan will be effective in establishing coexistence between turkeys and local residents. In the meantime, McNerney advises that people “act as the dominant species.” Don't let gangster guinea fowl-chicken-peacocks ruin your day.

Works Cited

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