



## Considerations For Coexisting With Wild Turkeys

### Introduction

Wildlife living in urban areas provide unique opportunities for residents. People can enjoy the opportunity to view wildlife from or near their property. Wild turkeys are one species that can adapt to the urban lifestyle, provided adequate resources for living are available. In a natural setting, wild turkeys feed on a wide variety of food items including insects, seeds, nuts, berries, buds, green leaves, small frogs, lizards, snakes, and much more. They generally travel in family groups or small flocks, consisting of 5-20 individuals. They forage for food by passing through an area picking at everything edible and even scratching to find food covered by leaves or grass. A flock of birds will quickly find most of the edible food in an area and move on to new areas in search of other forage. Flocks will roost in trees at varying locations throughout their home range. The typical wild turkey home range is several square miles.

Like all wildlife, urban dwelling species are best left as wild as possible. Animal foraging, resting, disease transmission, and populations may be altered when people interact with wildlife. These changes may result in undesirable consequences to both wildlife, people, and pets. When urban turkeys behave similar to their wild counterparts, damage to people's property is generally minor and tolerable. However, when turkey behavior is changed, these birds can become an unwelcome nuisance and cause considerable damage to you or your neighbor's property.

### Turkey damage

Behavioral changes frequently begin with alterations to foraging habits. Intentional and unintentional turkey feeding is the catalyst that first alters foraging habits, then increases flock size, changes roosting behavior, and can turn wild birds into semi-domesticated birds. Feeding encourages turkeys to remain in a smaller area. Home range size can decline to a few acres. Flock size can increase dramatically because several flocks can be drawn into the same area. Flocks will often begin roosting at the same site night after night. Additionally, family groups that would normally disperse into other areas remain together. Over time, the problems worsen because supplemental feeding enables more turkeys to inhabit your neighborhood than would normally occur with more limited, natural food resources.

Turkeys are relatively large birds and can cause considerable damage. Turkeys damage cars, shingles, decks, gardens, landscaping, and other property by pecking, scratching, and defecating. Semi-domesticated males sometimes exhibit aggression towards people during the breeding season or when expecting food handouts.

Turkey flocks numbering between 80-100 birds have been documented in some neighborhoods. Several residents from these neighborhoods are and have been experiencing considerable turkey damage. Property repairs can cost hundreds and even thousands of dollars. Your neighborhood is currently experiencing turkey damage. These problems could worsen and your residence may become included among those suffering from turkey damage. Financial compensation programs do not exist and the burden for repairing damage falls on the property owner.

## **Short term damage solutions**

- Discontinue all intentional and unintentional feeding
- Employ non-injurious, non-lethal harassment/hazing to keep turkeys off your property. You will need a permit from ODFW to haze turkeys. It is illegal to harass wildlife without a permit. Hazing permits are issued at no cost and make it legal for you to chase, scare, or disturb unwanted turkeys on your property. Haze turkeys when they are feeding, resting, and roosting in areas where damage is occurring. Common hazing techniques include chasing, spraying with a garden hose, setting motion activated sprinklers, mylar streamers or scarecrows; bright lights and noise can be used to disturb roosting turkeys.
- Communicate with your neighbors. The large turkey flocks in your neighborhood can be dispersed into smaller, more tolerable groups if the community works together to haze and discontinue feeding. If only a few people participate, the problems will likely continue.
- Work with your local ODFW wildlife biologist. Let us know if damage subsides or worsens, was hazing effective, has the flock size changed, etc.

## **Long term damage solutions**

The long term solution to turkey problems in high density residential areas is for the community to recognize feeding turkeys is not a good thing to do. Turkey problems will continue until all feeding stops. Even doling out small portions of food can perpetuate the problem because several people doing this will have a negative, cumulative influence. Once feeding stops, the turkeys will resume a more normal distribution and activity pattern over time. The turkeys will likely stay in the general area, but will only come around occasionally and in smaller groups. Most people can tolerate an occasional visit of fewer birds, but few people can tolerate lots of birds day after day.

Feeding is not always intentional. Song bird feeders can attract turkeys when bird seed falls to the ground or even the slugs and worms attracted to debris accumulating under song bird feeders. Turkeys may be attracted to dog or cat food left outside. Any artificial food source capable of attracting turkeys needs to be made unavailable.

In residential areas where turkeys become a problem, people often want the turkeys trapped and relocated. While this may sound like a good solution, unfortunately it is not. ODFW has employed trap and removal programs in similar situations. Based on our experience, trap and removal efforts are ineffective in solving turkey damage problems. A few turkeys are relatively easy to trap during the winter when flocks congregate. The problem is they cannot all be captured at once. Walk-in pens are used to capture turkeys in residential areas. After several turkeys enter these traps (usually 4 – 8), inevitably one will panic and try to fly. As soon as it starts bouncing off the top or sides of the trap the others panic and will avoid going into the trap. It often takes weeks of continued baiting before additional birds will go into the trap. After a couple captures, remaining birds will not go into the trap. The number of turkeys trapped and removed will quickly be replaced the following summer (e.g., hens lay 10-12 eggs per clutch). Moreover, even if all the birds could somehow be captured, other flocks will repopulate the area if feeding continues.

With simple precautions to avoid attracting turkeys to food, and with consideration for your neighbors, everyone will be more able to coexist with an occasional visit from these beautiful birds. Please help keep turkeys wild and appreciated rather than contributing to making them domesticated and unwanted.

## **ODFW contacts**

For more information about coexisting with turkeys contact your nearest ODFW field office.