

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Turkey Trouble: Resolving Conflicts with Turkey

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

General Information

Wild turkeys have lived in most parts of Massachusetts since the time of the Colonial settlement. However, human development and hunting took their toll and by 1851, turkeys were extirpated in Massachusetts. Restoration started around 1911, but it took many relocation attempts before the population was successfully restored in the late 1990s. Today you can find wild turkeys living in most parts of the state, with the exception of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

The turkeys found in Massachusetts have rich, brown-shaded plumage with a metallic or iridescent sheen, and white and black stripes on their primary wing feathers. The males (called toms) can stand up to 4 feet tall and weigh more than 20 pounds, while the females (called hens) are approximately half the size and weight of the males.

Turkeys are social animals that live and feed together in flocks. They live in a wide range of habitats, including forested, semi-forested

and open habitat. Turkeys must have both trees and grasses for feeding, resting, roosting, and nesting. Trees provide food (nuts, seeds, and fruit), resting areas, cover from predators, and a place to roost at night. (Hens with young will roost on the ground until the young are able to fly.) Grasses are important for both adult and young because they provide food for adult turkeys, and an environment where the young can find insects.

Nesting season starts in late March or early April, during which time the hens build their nests on the ground, usually in the tall grass of fields or in the forest. The hens lay one egg a day until 10 – 12 eggs have been laid. The average incubation time is 28 days, and in late May or early June, the eggs will hatch over a 24 – 36 hour period.

During the first 4 weeks of life, baby turkeys (called poults) are unable to fly and rely on their mother for protection. Hens hiss and ruffle their feathers to scare away predators and will only abandon the nest as a last option. When the poults are between 4 – 5 weeks old, they are able to fly 25 – 50 feet and begin to roost in trees with their mother. Turkeys learn from each other, usually by imitating older birds. Through this process they learn how to find food and how to navigate the boundaries of their home range.

Unlike the domestic turkey, wild turkeys can fly up to 55 miles per hour and run up to 25 miles per hour. They have several predators, including humans, crows, snakes, skunks, raccoons, and opossums. The average life span for a wild turkey is 3 – 4 years.

Wild turkeys are social birds that live in flocks, which are organized by "pecking order". Sometimes turkeys view people as part of the "flock", especially if the birds have been fed by people. The turkeys may believe the human is part of the "pecking order" and will treat them accordingly. If a turkey views someone as dominant, they will act submissive or fearful. If someone is viewed as being a subordinate, the turkey will try to bully him/her. Turkeys may determine a person to be a male or a female, regardless of the person's true gender. Those perceived to be a male may be challenged by the adult male turkeys or followed and called to by the females. Likewise, those perceived to be a female may be courted by male turkeys.



Possible Conflicts and Solutions

Do not feed turkeys.

Whether intentional or not, feeding wild animals can cause them to act tame or can encourage bold or aggressive behavior.

Clean up bird feeder areas.

Birdseed can attract wild turkeys so make sure you clean up spilt seed around bird feeders daily or use a feeder designed to keep seed off the ground.

Do not be intimidated by a turkey.

Aggressive or bold turkeys can be deterred by loud noises, spray from a water hose and/or a leashed dog.

Protect your garden.

Turkeys looking for food in your garden can be humanely deterred by spray from a water hose, a leashed dog or fencing that covers the bulbs in your garden.

THE LIVING WITH WILDLIFE MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term, and cost-effective manner.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living With Wildlife program, call (617) 522-7400, visit www.LivingWithWildlife.org or e-mail LivingWithWildlife@mspca.org.