

Wild Wednesday 25 November 2020. Turkey, by Walt Anderson

OK, it's time to talk turkey, so let's dispense with any gobbledygook. The turkey is a prominent symbol of Thanksgiving, and despite all the chaos and turmoil we've experienced in 2020, let's be grateful for the good things that have come our way.

After a prolonged negotiation process, we are very close to a deal that will protect about 475 prime acres of the Granite Dells as Natural Open Space, an amazing win for the community, for visitors, and for the diverse wildlife that lives there. This is reason enough to celebrate, even as we are thankful for the health of loved ones and feel sympathy for the many who have fallen victim to the pandemic.

Never before in the history of the City of Prescott have so many citizens been involved so actively and effectively in expressing their strong desires for a positive conservation outcome. The citizens presented an informed and united front in seeking a win-win deal that will truly benefit the area for present and future generations. While there are still details to work out, the result promises to be a legacy action and an important step toward creating a truly significant regional park and preserve over many more acres of the Dells.

So at this time of Thanksgiving, let's show a little appreciation for the bird that brings people together in a spirit of cooperation and gratitude: the turkey.

The turkey was domesticated in what is now Mexico by Native Americans and was spread by trade up into the Four Corners region. Escapees as early as 600 AD spread through the higher elevations of current Arizona to become the Merriam's race of the Wild Turkey. A small number of the Gould's race reach into far southeastern Arizona.

Domesticated birds from southern Mexico were taken back to Europe, and when traders brought them to England, they were given the "turkey" name. Later the domestics were brought by the English colonists to the colonies, even though the eastern race of the Wild Turkey was abundant.

John James Audubon considered the Wild Turkey the very finest of birds, devoting 17 pages to this bird (far more than for any other bird species) in his *Ornithological Biography* of 1831. He honored it as Plate 1 of his splendid paintings (even today on Thanksgiving, the turkey often resides on plate 1).

As European settlers spread across North America, they exterminated Wild Turkeys through overhunting, overgrazing, and habitat destruction. Arizona lost most of its birds, and even as early as 1919, repatriation efforts were underway, with some birds released in the Camp Wood area near Prescott. More were released at Mt. Union in 1940-41, and by 1946, the Bradshaw population was "booming."

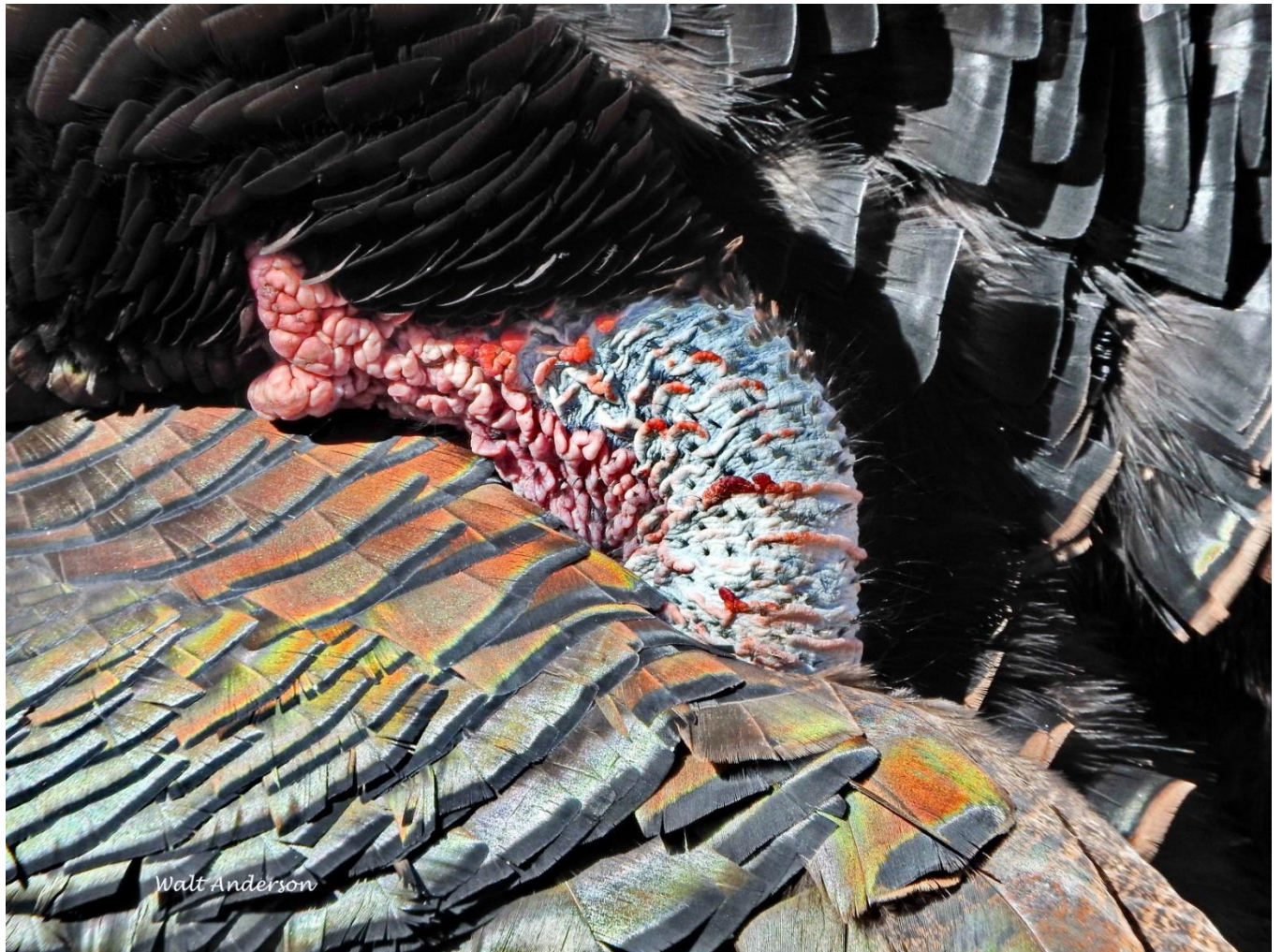
The recovery of the Wild Turkey in Arizona has been dramatic, and it is possible that pioneering birds may make it back to the Granite Dells, where the valley of No-name Creek seems like excellent habitat. As we work cooperatively with City officials to save as much of the Granite Dells as possible for a regional park and preserve, the return of this magnificent bird would be an iridescent feather in our caps.



Turkeys are sexually dimorphic, with the male about twice as heavy as the female. Male Turkeys are among the heaviest flying birds in the Americas, but they fly powerfully and roost in tall trees when possible. The reason for the gender size disparity comes from intense sexual selection. The males put on amazing courtship displays, bulging out their wing feathers and spreading their classic turkey tails. Their fleshy head ornaments swell and take on brilliant colors. Testosterone surges lead to male-male aggression, even fights, with savage pecks to the bare, vulnerable skin ornaments.



Hens choose among the toughest, showiest toms (why tom turkey and tom cat?), an excellent example of a polygynous mating system. Female choice has selected for the bizarre wattles, caruncles, and vermiform snood, which, at the peak of the breeding period, swells dramatically and hangs draped over the bill. Add “snood” to your crossword vocabulary while you’re at it. Hunters mimic the calls of females and attract over-juiced males looking for a good time, but despite their great size and amorous distractions, turkeys can be a challenge to hunt. The fat, flightless, dim-witted domestic version bred for human consumption is an insult to the species. But please pass a drumstick.



I marvel at the iridescent, coppery feathers of a tom turkey. Apparently, feather brightness signals a healthy, virile male most attractive to the females. Surely the warty excrescences on head and neck represent beauty in the turkey world, even if it doesn't translate as well to human esthetics. The Turkey Vulture (unrelated to either turkeys or true vultures) gets its common name by having a somewhat similar bare head, though for entirely different reasons.



Turkeys are highly social birds, sometimes in huge flocks. Especially common in Arizona's pine forests, particularly where oaks and native grasses provide reliable food, the turkeys often move to lower elevations (pinyon-juniper in the north, Madrean oak woodland in the south of the state) in winter. Harsh winters and drought can both take a toll on their survival, and annual mortality can exceed 50%.



Fortunately, turkeys are prolific breeders, usually laying 8 – 15 eggs in a nest tended only by the hen. Once I flushed a hen (big bird, but really cryptic when on a nest!) from a clutch of 17 along the upper Verde River. The precocial chicks leave the nest with the mother shortly after hatching, and gradually the broods merge with other females and their young into larger flocks, while the males are off in their own peer groups. Many a poult ends up in the talons or teeth of owls, hawks, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, and other predators. Even full-grown turkeys can be gobbled up by the larger carnivores. Still, repatriated populations often expand rapidly, sometimes dispersing long distances and colonizing turkeyless ranges. Apparently, turkeys released in the Santa Ritas south of Tucson colonized the Baboquivaris far to the west, and birds from the Mt. Union population in the Bradshaws fairly quickly expanded to Prescott and beyond. We're waiting for them in the Granite Dells.



Benjamin Franklin was not pleased about the choice of the Bald Eagle as our National Bird, as he considered it “a Bird of bad moral Character . . . a rank Coward.” He had much more respect for the turkey, considering it “though a little vain & silly, a Bird of Courage.” President Trump, following tradition, just pardoned two turkeys. Pardon me? For what crime are we pardoning these two birds? Aren’t we the ones slaughtering millions of factory-farmed birds for the table? Ironical for a lame duck to pardon a turkey anyway.