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Let's Talk Turkey
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We have all seen them, lurking around the foothills in oak hardwood and conifer forests that border on open spaces such as pastures, fields, orchards, vineyards, and marshes -- Wild Turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*)! As Thanksgiving approaches, here are a few fun facts about our feathered neighbors.

Where did these big birds come from, and how did they get their name? The wild turkey is one of the only native North American animals that have been domesticated. In the 1500's, Spanish explorers and traders introduced the tasty fowl from Mexico to the people of Europe. Confusion ensued as to where the bird, which looked similar to an English guinea fowl, had originated. In error, it was believed that the bird was from the Turkish Empire, so it became "a Turkey". Thanks to mistaken identities and miscommunication, the symbol of the Pilgrims first Thanksgiving feast is one of the most international of birds when it comes to its name.

As American history marched on, Benjamin Franklin proposed that the wild turkey should replace the American bald eagle as our country's national bird. He felt that the turkey was a "bird of courage". However, a majority of his fellow Founding Fathers did not share his opinion so the American bald eagle remained on our national seal.

What do wild turkeys do all day? Well, they eat, walk, talk, dust, preen, and roost for the night. Let's start with their preferred eating habits that can impact gardeners. They are opportunistic foragers, scratching in leaf litter and dirt, chasing bugs and milling for seeds. Turkeys are omnivorous. Included in their diet are nuts, berries, grapes, grass, sedges, grain, insects, and small reptiles. According to the University of California Integrated Pest Management program, turkeys can be problematic in vineyards and home gardens. Grapes are especially tasty to turkeys. Habitat control would consist of fencing, netting, noise frightening devices, mylar streamers, or scare balloons.

In their hunt for food and water, turkeys can walk a mile or two a day. As they stroll along in a flock, or “rafter,” they communicate with each other by gobbling, clucking, and even purring. They have 28 different calls including an alarm call and a mating call that are so loud, they can be heard for up to a mile away. Turkeys can fly for short distances. At night, they fly up into trees to roost for protection from ground predators.

Turkeys enjoy preening and dusting their many feathers and sunning themselves. An adult turkey has between 5,000 to 6,000 feathers. The adult male, called a tom, has a lush, full tail-feather fan to attract the ladies, called hens. An adolescent male turkey is called a jake and female adolescent is called a jenny. The youngsters are called poults, and they love eating little insects.

On a very personal level, turkey droppings can tell a bird’s sex and age. Male droppings are J-shaped; female droppings are spiral-shaped. The larger the diameter, the older the bird.

As you drive in the Foothills this fall, be especially careful to watch for a rafter of wild turkeys. Even though they have good daylight vision and can run quite fast, many times they take their own sweet time crossing the road. Gobble, gobble!

Due to the pandemic, Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future continue to be limited. We realize our public classes are valued by county residents and we are doing our best to provide virtual learning opportunities. We currently have no events scheduled, but you can find our recorded classes on many gardening topics here:

https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Public_Education_Classes/Handouts_-_Presentations/.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public open twice monthly from November to March: 1st Saturday -- Monthly 9 a.m. - 12 p.m. and 2nd Saturday -- 9:00 - 12 p.m.. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open.

Check http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information.

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We’ll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.