



TURKEYS IN BERKELEY

by Douglas Evans

A week before Thanksgiving, I sat at my desk, wondering what children’s story to write next. While I stared at my computer screen, I heard some gobbling outside my office window. I looked up to see a tall tom turkey, strutting across my backyard. His glossy brown feathers shimmered in the afternoon sun. The red wattle on his throat wobbled when he gobbled again.

“A turkey in Berkeley?” I said to Shadow, my black cat, who sat on the windowsill. “Now there’s a surprise.”

Berkeley, California was a large busy city. Seeing a three-foot tall wild turkey behind my house was unexpected.

As I watched the tom, four smaller hen turkeys entered the yard. They pecked the grass and yelped, “Turk-turk. Turk-turk.” I didn’t know whether to be overjoyed or annoyed. I had writing to do.

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“It’s hard to think with all that racket,” I said, and Shadow purred in agreement.

On the computer, I googled “California wild turkeys”. A Web site about game birds told me that there were over 200,000 wild turkeys in the state. The Department of Fish and Game brought them here from Texas fifty years ago for hunting. I learned that in the autumn the birds often leave the wooden hills where they live and enter urban areas searching for food.

“Yep, that’s what our turkeys are doing,” I said to the cat.

Outside the window, the four hens now stood in my garden pecking at dried berries and stabbing holes in the one remaining pumpkin. The big tom had stepped onto my patio and was eating the food in Shadow’s dinner dish.

“Shoo! Shoo!” I shouted. But all five turkeys ignored me. “Get! Get! Go away!” Still not a single bird budged.

I rose from my desk and raced into the kitchen. I grabbed a broom, and charged out the back door. Holding the broom before me, I charged at the gobbler on my patio.

“Go away bird,” I shouted. “Scram! Scat! I have a story to write.”

To my surprise, the tom kept eating the cat food. It showed not the least sign of fear. At the same time, he left a gooey white dropping on my patio rug.

I faced the hens in the garden. “Get! Get!” I yelled and received the same results.

After waving the broom and stomping my feet to no avail, I returned to my office. This time on the computer, I googled “getting rid of wild

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turkeys”. I read that hunting or trapping the birds in the city was illegal. To rid them from my yard, I should get a large dog or hire a professional turkey trapper.

“But I don’t want a dog,” I said. “And hiring someone sounds expensive.”

Scrolling down the page, I learned that I should appear large and fierce to the turkeys. Be bold. Show them who’s boss, the Web site read. One way was to charge at them with an open umbrella.

At this point, Shadow bolted outside through the cat flap in the kitchen door. A small but scrappy cat, she had fought raccoons in the backyard twice her size. I knew she didn’t approve of a turkey eating her dinner. When she saw the tom, she arched her back and hissed.

The gobbler turned toward the cat. Its tall tail feathers spread into a large fan. I knew the sharp spurs on the back of his lower legs were his weapons.

“No, Shadow,” I shouted out the window. “Don’t mess with that ornery bird.”

I snatched an umbrella from the coat closet and raced to the backyard.

Shadow and the large turkey were at a standoff. Tom turkey, bald wrinkled head bowed, stared at the cat with raisin-like eyes. Shadow was crouched, ready to spring.

I opened my umbrella and pointed the black chute at the gobbler. Walking boldly toward it, I shouted, “I’ll show you who’s boss of this yard, bird.”

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The turkey turned toward me. It fluttered its wings, and squawked. The next thing I knew, it was flying toward me, clawed feet first.

I dropped the umbrella and dashed back into my house. I turned to see the tom land on my open umbrella. With a few strokes of his talons, it ripped it to ribbons.

Shadow looked at me as if ashamed.

“Well, that showed him, didn’t it,” I said with a shrug.

But where were the other birds, the hens? At that moment, something yelped behind me, and I spun around. The four females stood in my kitchen. I had left the back door open and they strutted right in. Two turkeys had their heads inside the wastebasket. One was pecking at her reflection on the refrigerator door and the fourth was eating crumbs on the counter. Puddles of white turkey poop stained my kitchen floor.

“Oh, no,” I shouted. “You turkeys are not taking over this house, too.”

I stepped to the sink and pulled out the spray nozzle. I turned on the water full blast and let the birds have it. All four hens fluttered into the air. One skidded across my kitchen table, breaking several dishes. Another knocked over a flower vase and smashed my favorite coffee mug. But I kept spraying, until the water jet forced the flock out the back door.

As I slammed the door shut, Shadow shot inside through the cat flap.

“We better surrender the backyard to the turkeys for now, old buddy,” I said. “Maybe by tomorrow morning they’ll be gone.”

That evening, I read another Web site about wild turkeys. It said that the birds fly into low branches of trees to roost at night. Not my turkeys. The five of them flew onto the roof of house. All night long, I heard them

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up there scratching, clucking, and cackling. I hardly slept a wink.

In the morning, the turkeys had returned to the backyard. From my writing desk, I watched them peck at the lemons on my tree, knock out a section of the fence, and chase away the mail carrier. Their gobbles and squawks were as loud as yesterday.

With writing making again impossible, I searched the Internet for more ways of deterring turkeys. But none of the suggestions worked. First, I played loud sounds of a barking dog out the window. The turkeys paid no attention. Next, I banged two pots together. Again, the turkeys seemed to be deaf. When I turned my backyard lawn sprinkler, the birds merely fluttered to the top of the fence and sat there until I felt guilty for wasting water.

By now, the backyard grass was ripped and rutted. The fence bore long turkey scratches. My flowerbed was trampled, and the patio was slick with white droppings.

Around noon, I told Shadow, "I've tried every trick to rid the yard of turkeys but one. I must remove all sources of food and just wait for them to leave."

Arming myself with a ski pole and a trash can lid, I stepped into my backyard. I picked the pumpkin in the garden and the lemons off the tree. I took down the bird feeder and gathered all the acorns and seedpods from the lawn. Finally, I removed Shadow's supper dish.

"You'll be eating inside for a while, old buddy," I told the cat. "We're just no match for those turkeys."

For the rest of the day I sat at my desk, staring out the window. I

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watched the turkeys hunt for food in vain. Finally, toward evening, they strutted from my backyard. In single file, with tom turkey in the lead, they waddled down the driveway and out into the street.

Shadow and I stood on the sidewalk, watching them go. The cat purred as if to approve.

“Good riddance, birds,” I said. “I’ll think of you during Thanksgiving dinner.”

On my way inside my house, I found a souvenir of the gobbler’s visit. A long, brown turkey feather lay on the patio. At my desk, I cut a sharp point on the end it. I dipped the point into a bottle of ink.

“Finally, I can begin writing,” I said to Shadow. “And I have a great idea for a new children’s story.”

Then, using my new quill, I wrote the title on a sheet of paper:

WILD TURKEYS IN BERKELEY