Turkeys take to cities, towns

The Boston Globe

By Keith O'Brien, Globe Staff | October 23, 2007

BROOKLINE - On a recent afternoon, Kettly Jean-Felix parked her car on Beacon Street in Brookline, fed the parking meter, wheeled around to go to the optician and came face to face with a wild turkey.

The turkey eyed Jean-Felix. Jean-Felix eyed the turkey. It gobbled. She gasped. Then the turkey proceeded to follow the Dorchester woman over the Green Line train tracks, across the street, through traffic, and all the way down the block, pecking at her backside as she went.

"This is so scary," Jean-Felix said, finally taking refuge inside Cambridge Eye Doctors in Brookline's bustling Washington Square. "I cannot explain it."

Notify the neighbors: The turkeys are spreading through suburbia. Wild turkeys, once eliminated in Massachusetts, are flourishing from Plymouth to Concord and - to the surprise of some wildlife officials - making forays into densely populated suburban and urban areas, including parts of Boston, Cambridge and, most recently, Brookline.

Some Brookline residents have welcomed the birds, happy to see wildlife strolling amid the nannies with $300 strollers and Trader Joe's shoppers. But many others worry what the keen-eyed, sometimes ornery birds might do, prompting as many as a dozen calls to the police department every day.

"Some people are getting very upset," said Brookline police animal control officer Pierre Verrier. "One of the biggest things is, they're afraid. They don't want the turkeys to get hurt. And the other thing is, they're afraid of the turkeys around their children. They don't know

what they'll do."

As such, Brookline police issued a statement last month, telling residents what they should - or should not - do if they meet a wild turkey in town. The basic advice: stay away from the turkeys. But still, people keep calling police headquarters to report the strangest sight: Turkeys in downtown Brookline.

* * *

July 20, 9:31 a.m., Rawson Road: Caller reports 18 turkeys in her backyard. "Something must be done," caller says. "It's just not right." Requests animal control officer.

* * *

Wild turkeys - the official game bird of Massachusetts - are impressive animals that can grow to be roughly 20 pounds and 4 feet tall. By 1851, they had been eliminated from Massachusetts, a victim of hunting.

"We were turkey-less for many years," said Wayne Petersen, director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Important Birds Area Program. "And then we decided it would be quite nice to get them back on the landscape."

Efforts to revitalize the state's turkey population between 1911 and 1967 failed. Then, in 1972 and 1973, the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife released 37 turkeys in the Berkshires. These turkeys survived and bred. And between 1979 and 1996, wildlife officials trapped more than 500 turkeys in the Berkshires and released them elsewhere in the state.

Biologists were pleased; today's turkey population in Massachusetts lingers around 20,000. But Marion Larson, an information and education biologist at MassWildlife, said officials had not counted on the turkey's appetite for suburban - and even urban - living.

"That was something that surprised us," Larson said. "Who knew? The last time there were turkeys in Massachusetts there weren't a whole heck of a lot of suburbs."

This time around, of course, that is not the case, and turkeys have proven especially adaptable to residential living. By his last count, Verrier said, there are at least two dozen wild turkeys living in Brookline, feeding off everything from bird seed to gutter trash and, sometimes, scaring the wits out of the townspeople.

* * *

September 4, 11:01 a.m., Chatham Circle and Chatham Street: Caller - who had gone under some beech trees to take a picture of turkeys - reports four turkeys chasing him. Requests animal control officer.

* * *

The problem, according to some Brookline residents, is that the turkeys can be aggressive at times. Dr. Ruth Smith, an internist from New York City, was staying with a cousin in Brookline a couple of weeks ago when she was stalked by what she describes as a 3-foot-

tall turkey.

"He came at me and, at first, I tried to shoo him away," Smith recalled. "I figured I'd just go 'Shoo!' and he'd go. But he was very aggressive."

Smith said she escaped by ducking into the Dunkin' Donuts on Beacon Street. But some of the hounded do not have the luxury of going inside. Brookline postal carrier Rosanne Lane said she has skipped houses on her mail route because turkeys dissuaded her from approaching.

"They make a lot of noise and I just take off," said Lane.

Under state law, an animal control officer can kill a turkey if it creates a public safety threat. In 2005, for example, Canton police killed three. But for now in Brookline, it has not come to that, said Verrier. When dispatched to the scene of a turkey, Verrier offers advice instead.

He tells people not to feed them, not to be intimidated by them, and to keep their distance. Still, some people cannot help themselves. They need to be near the turkeys.

* * *

September 7, 7:39 a.m., Druce Street: Two packs of turkeys (15) in the road . . . Two not getting along.

* * *

Over an eight-hour stretch last week in Brookline, a lone turkey walked Beacon Street, strutting at times, preening at others, and napping every now and again in the landscaping near the sidewalk.

Most people did not even notice. And those who did simply edged a few feet away from him and kept right on walking.

But as afternoon turned to dusk - and the turkey, a male, moved down Beacon Street into the heart of Washington Square - a crowd began to gather.

Some, like Jessica Dolber, snapped pictures. Others, like Kelly Stearn, called police.

But not Kettly Jean-Felix, the woman who had been followed by the turkey earlier that afternoon.

When she finally left the optician's office on the corner just an hour after being stalked by the turkey, she headed straight for her car. And this time the bird did not notice Jean-Felix. He was too busy eating peanut shells in front of the 7-Eleven and gobbling to the delight of the crowd. ■