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The Turkey Cam: A Wild Bird's Surprise Move-in Helps People Quarantine

Cover Page Footnote

A secret camera documenting a wild bird's surprise nest in a suburban yard in Watertown, Massachusetts, helps people quarantine.

The Turkey Cam

A wild bird's surprise move-in helps people quarantine

Daniel Grossman



ONCE UPON A TIME, A TURKEY LAID AN EGG. IN MY YARD. I DON'T KNOW exactly when or why. By the time I noticed in early June 2020, this hen had laid an even dozen. I discovered the clutch tightly clustered on a serving-plate-size patch scratched bare in a flower garden.

The turkey had probably adopted our yard in mid-May 2020, two months into the pandemic. My wife, Sarah, and I were realizing that the virus had cinched the world—and us, in suburban Boston—in its grip.

We'd canceled a hiking vacation in Spain and a cross-country flight to our son's college graduation in Los Angeles. I'd called off a reporting trip to Indonesia. It had become clear that staying safe required sitting tight where we were, cosseted within the four corners of a quarter-acre suburban lot six miles from downtown. The virus had frayed our ties to everyone we cared about, disrupted our connections to the natural world, and blurred our perceptions of the seasons. Then, the turkey came into our yard.

THE EGGS ENTERED OUR LIVES BEFORE THE TURKEY DID. I SPIED THEM IN A thick lily bed. They were nearly as big as lemons, cream colored and with heavy ruddy-brown speckling. We'd never seen eggs like that. Could they be from a mallard? A Canada goose? Sarah thought that maybe the nest was an elaborate prank and that I might be the perpetrator. A little later we took another look and solved the mystery.

It's remarkable, considering the sweep of history, that this bird nested in a suburban yard. The wild turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*, was abundant in Massachusetts when Europeans invaded in the early seventeenth century. But the settlers rapidly razed the forest for farms, destroying the habitat turkeys prefer, diminishing the acorns and chestnuts they like to eat, and making hunting easier. The birds did not fear humans, making them easy to pick off even with crude fowling guns.

The pre-Columbian turkey population in Massachusetts has been estimated at 39,000. By the mid-nineteenth century the fan-tailed bird was completely extinct in Massachusetts and in much of the rest of its original range, most of the United States east of the Rockies.¹ Then, farming on the East Coast

1 sora.unm.edu/sites/default/files/BirdObserver5.3_Page76-83_The%20Wild%20Turkey%20in%20Massachusetts_James%20E.%20Cardoza.pdf

A screenshot from the Turkey Cam caught the moment the eggs started hatching. TURKEY CAM

declined, in favor of agriculture on land in the Midwest and on the West Coast. In time, the Massachusetts forest recovered.

Beginning in the 1930s state game managers began reintroducing turkeys in Massachusetts. It took decades to figure out how to do it right. Early attempts with farm-raised birds failed. Domesticated varieties weren't tough enough, but reintroducing wild birds succeeded. In recent decades the turkey has literally made great strides. The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife estimates that the state has a population of more than 30,000 free-ranging gobblers.² The agency now even publishes advice on avoiding clashes with turkeys. It notes that the birds respond passionately to "shiny objects and reflections of themselves"³—a behavior I've noticed in my own species.

Outside Boston, the turkey population has exploded. Only a few years ago I'd never even seen a wild turkey. Now I see them frequently, sometimes from my kitchen window, strutting across neighbors' yards. They must be nesting somewhere—but in my neighborhood? I'd never seen one here. James Cardoza, the wildlife manager who led the state's successful turkey reintroduction campaign, wrote in his treatise *The Wild Turkey in Massachusetts* (Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, 2009) that a turkey nest is "usually next to a stump or under a tangle of vines or fallen branches . . . often at the edge of a field or clearing and is usually not far from water." Hardly what it looks like around my yard, where many houses are wedged into tiny lots and the nearest waterbody is half a mile away.

Their nests might be hidden, but troupes of turkeys now saunter along sidewalks. Even in nearby Somerville, one of the most densely populated cities in the United States, a turkey nicknamed Mayor Turkatone (tur-kah-TONE-ee, just like Joseph Curtatone, the city's actual mayor) took up residence in the spring of 2020, making frequent appearances documented in an Instagram account it allegedly set up.

A FEW MINUTES AFTER NOTICING THE EGGS, I CHECKED ON THE NEST. I discovered who'd laid the big eggs. The hen had returned by then. The garden's thick vegetation hid her torso. But her slender black neck stuck up like periscope above our lilies of the valley. She looked straight at me but didn't move or seem bothered by my presence.

2 mass.gov/service-details/learn-about-turkeys

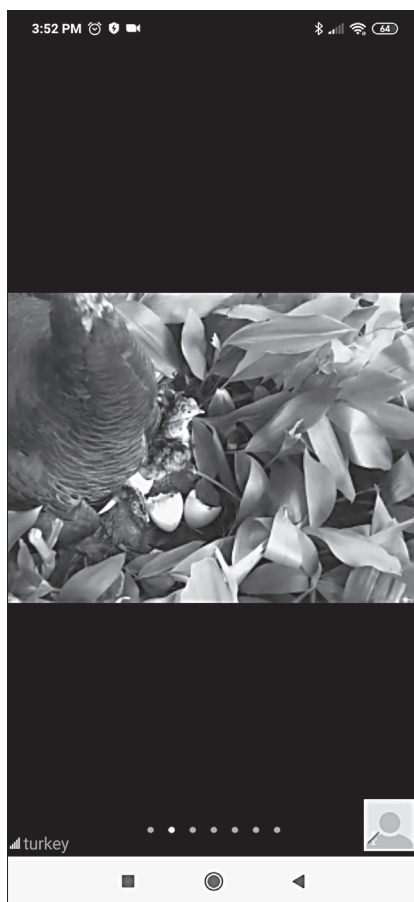
3 mass.gov/service-details/prevent-conflicts-with-turkeys

She had a compact head with a pale yellow, curved bill, white eyebrows and large, dark eyes. A pastel pink wattle hung loosely below her chin. I didn't name her. She wasn't cute. But she was, simply, a miracle of nature reproducing right under our noses.

I wanted to watch her while I worked at my desk. I had an outdated iPhone with a camera and Wi-Fi that worked. I hooked the phone into our home wireless network and connected it to a Zoom account I named "Turkey Cam." I strapped the phone to a tripod positioned right above the hen and snaked a charging cable to it. After some trial and error positioning the phone and troubleshooting with settings, I had a close-up of the bird on my screen. And I discovered how fascinating watching eggs incubating can be.

The bird maintained a state of unrelenting vigilance, twisting her head abruptly at the sound of distant horn honks and door slams. She maintained strict routines. She stood up about every 45 minutes and shoveled the eggs with her bill. She was turning them, for even heating. Every afternoon she left the nest for an hour. I never saw her eat anything, but she must have been filling up on food and water. Once, in a fit of scientific curiosity—or maybe a touch of devilry—I moved one of the eggs a few inches outside the nest while she lunched. When she returned, she fluffed up her feathers and sat down as normal. But then she got up. Something was wrong. She looked down, nudged the wayward egg back, and lowered herself down again.

Watching this sentient being sit Zen-like day after day, untroubled by our human turmoil, helped to settle my nerves during the troubling early months of the pandemic. Streaming



Another screenshot caught the fuzzy brood just before they followed their mother off to further adventures. TURKEY CAM

on Zoom had an added benefit: I could let my friends in on the fun. I could see who else was watching, creating community that the pandemic had stolen. Some friends logged in first thing in the morning and stayed connected till sunset. Others dropped by now and again. Sometimes people I didn't recognize joined. A niece in California shared the link with some university colleagues. Now these professors were watching from their desks.

Comments the turkey fan club members sent were revealing in their own way. Many remarked how the bird helped them keep their sanity. "This is weirdly fascinating and calming," a friend wrote. Another called the turkey a "fabulous juxtaposition to the news coverage and anxiety and heartbreak we are feeling." Somebody said the turkey cam was "infinitely more relaxing than any of the other Zoom sessions I've been in over the past three months."

Housebound people petitioned me to adjust the camera angle. Some worried when it got hot or rained hard. One woman complained that the father wasn't helping the hen out.

Three weeks after we found the nest, eight of eleven eggs hatched. One of them had disappeared early on; two others would never hatch. For several hours the gawky hatchlings repeatedly crawled out from under the mother, then retreated beneath her feathers. Their brown, mottled heads sat snugly against their downy torsos. Their necks were oddly short. Within hours, the mother straightened her legs and stalked off. The fuzzy brood bunched jerkily around her and followed.

I saw the troupe once again, a few days later, over a chain link fence behind our house. The mom clucked softly, urging her offspring over an obstacle. The chicks peeped peevishly. Then, they disappeared behind a house.

I was thrilled and strangely comforted to watch so close up a turn of life's cycles. The stoic turkey had given me strength, and when she left, I felt a hollowness a bit like when my two kids had left home. She'd made me an empty nester, again.

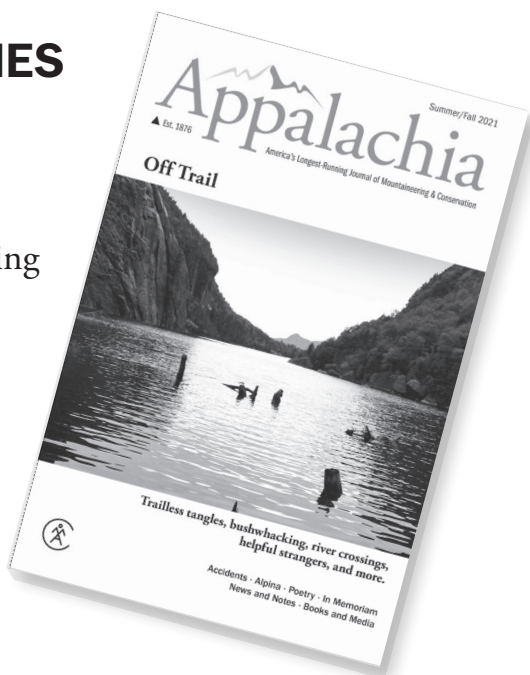
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