



## The View From Heifer Hill—March 2023

### Giants in the Winter Garden

EVERY MORNING I go out to the glade outside my windows and leave piles of sunflower seeds in the snow. I call the resulting display of birds and squirrels my winter garden. Each year, the seeds produce a slightly different mix. I always have blue jays, woodpeckers, mourning doves, chickadees and nuthatches. Some years I also have juncos, redpolls, or purple finches. This year I have a nice flock of evening grosbeaks. A few days ago, I glanced out to admire the show and saw giant dark beasts stalking through the garden on long legs.

It took a moment for my brain to resolve these creatures into turkeys; that processing period made me very aware of how exceptional these birds are. For starters, the biggest birds I typically see are blue jays (85 grams). Even in late winter, a tom turkey can weigh 8,000 grams (almost 18 pounds). The fattest gray squirrel weighs less than 600 grams.

Turkeys are the heftiest birds in a worldwide guild of walking foragers, the family Phasianidae, which also includes pheasants, peafowl and grouse. Turkeys spend the day on the move, scratching away leaf litter and grass thatch in search of food. Studies have shown that they frequently eat acorns, beech nuts, ash seeds, bulbs and tubers. In the winter, they forage for evergreen ferns, club mosses, and the spore fronds of sensitive ferns. They roll clumps of burdock across the snow and peck up the seeds. How do such big birds subsist on such a diet? They must have thought they hit

the jackpot when they found my piles of black oil sunflower seeds.

The turkeys strolled out of the woods and over to the seed by my window. Their feathers glistened from bronze to turquoise to midnight blue, and what beautiful eyes! Yes, their heads are naked and have fleshy lumps and bumps, but who are we to criticize unfeathered skin and facial protuberances?

All the turkeys in my flock had beards, the tassels that hang from the center of their chests and mark them as males. These boys, like all turkeys, also had snoods—bristly, wrinkly cones of flesh just above their beaks. The male turkey's snood does something special, though. When displaying for a hen, their snoods become red and blue and droop seductively over their beaks. Research has shown that the longer the snood, the more attractive the male.

Male turkeys are almost twice the size of females, and during the winter they form sex-segregated flocks. In the spring, as mating season approaches, the groups begin to break up. Often, small groups of males will stay together and perform for females as a troupe. A DNA study by Alan Krakauer revealed that these males are related to each other—usually siblings or half-siblings. This fraternity spends the off-season posturing and battling to determine who they will put forward as their top turkey for the mating season. Only this one will mate. Krakauer found that hens were more likely



to be impressed by a multi-male performance, increasing the likelihood that the genes of the backup dancers make it into the next generation.

I recently heard another story about the importance of turkey teamwork. A friend has been watching a flock of turkey hens in his backyard for the last couple of years and observed the following on two occasions: alerted to danger, the birds suddenly stopped feeding and strode with stealth and speed toward the house. The source of their consternation stood at the edge of the woods licking her lips—a bobcat. Meanwhile, the turkeys held a brief huddle, then turned, formed a phalanx, and charged the bobcat. Both times the fierce feline fled.

Such avian decision-making would come as no surprise to Joe Hutto. His book, *Illumination from the Flatwood*, describes his experiences raising twenty wild turkey poults. He went feral and wandered the woods of Florida with his brood. Out in the flatwoods, he says, “these creatures seem to become, in every way, my superiors—more alert, sensitive and aware. In many ways, more intelligent. Their understanding of the forest is beyond my ability to comprehend.”

My six toms have become regulars; I'm no longer startled when I see them. I remain amazed by their navigation of this season of cold and scarcity. I agree with Hutto; clearly their understanding of the forest is beyond my ability to comprehend.

