

WHILE MAN MAY INTERVENE, WILD ANIMALS REMAIN WILD 01/16/01

I witnessed a sight a couple of weeks ago I would have sworn one would never see in the Adirondacks, as I have known them. It was on the upper reaches of the West Canada Creek six miles or so north of Route 8 at Nobleboro.

We were driving along a winter logging road in a pickup truck when suddenly a large bearded tom turkey sauntered across the road ahead of us.

He seemed totally unconcerned with our presence and strolled along pecking at seeds or buds from low bushes. In spite of the deep powder snow his progress seemed surprisingly unimpeded. His actions would not have been that unusual had we been anywhere near human habitation where they have become accustomed to human activity.

This was brought abruptly to mind as I drove yesterday south on Route 8 from the intersection of Route 365. It was a cold, sunny day and several flocks of up to 50 birds were huddled together on the wood edges luxuriating in the warmth of the sun. It was obvious they felt it was more important to conserve what energy they had to remain warm rather than expend it in search of food.

Many animals that have to contend with harsh winter conditions exhibit a remarkable ability to preserve and go for days without eating. I recall a number of turkeys roosting in some large hard maples visible from the main highway near Danby, NY. It was a bitter, prolonged cold spell and they remained perched up high from ground predators for six full days.

One of the local fish and game clubs placed corn under the trees during the night, which the turkeys ignored. The weather warmed finally and they went on their way.

The other aspect that seemed unusual in the particular bird I first mentioned was that he apparently was traveling alone. Normally, turkeys seem to travel and coexist in flocks. The hens and young are grouped together while the gobblers prefer the company of the other males, except during the mating season. This is a characteristic exhibited by many other species, including humans – present company excepted, of course.

There have been many misconceptions about wildlife, some of which were held by professional biologists as well as the general public. The ability of the wild turkey to carve out a niche in an area so inhospitable as the Adirondacks is a perfect example. I hope it will be a permanent situation, but believe in my heart of hearts it won't be. It doesn't seem reasonable or possible if the winters we knew 40 years ago should return.

Turkey populations left entirely on their own without benefit of human influences would indeed be expected to disappear. Human intervention has proven to be a double-edged sword for both us and for many animal species. Examples are almost daily highlighted in the press and on television.

The most graphic examples illustrate the dangers posed by larger animals that, because of their very nature and size, present to people. The solutions are not as obvious as the ways to eliminate much of the danger.

One should heed the advice of Archibald Rutledge, famous author on the subject of animal behavior. Basically, he warns everyone to be aware of the possible danger posed by any species of animal large enough to cause injury to a person. I like to quote a statement attributed to him about wild animals: "The fact that old woodsmen have never had such an encounter is no proof against its possibilities, even against its likelihood."

I shudder whenever I see people literally put their lives, or worse yet their children's lives, in jeopardy with dangerous animals. Scenes of them hugging, petting or riding such animals are to me the ultimate examples of stupidity. I well remember the photo of my granddaughter perched on an elephant's back proudly, presented to me by my daughter-in-law.

Anyone who knows me at all can well imagine my response to her. If you guessed that it was not one of thanks, you are right.