

In the Order of Galliformes
By Paul Caseley

I hate Thanksgiving and I hate turkeys. I know what your mind immediately leaps to, the idea that there is too much pressure placed on being a perfect family and having the perfect family dinner and that's probably why I hate Thanksgiving. Or maybe you immediately decided I have a wildly dysfunctional family and that's why I hate probably not just Thanksgiving but all the holidays. Or perhaps you figured I don't like the taste of turkey meat or don't like the way its prepared and that's why I hate that particular holiday and food. If you thought any of these things, you would be completely wrong, dead wrong. I hate the holiday to be sure but I hate that damned bird even more and not as a food but as a living, breathing animal. These evil birds made my life hell on the last Thanksgiving my family celebrated and it was not an experience I will soon forget nor forgive. I know it is commonplace for politicians to pardon a turkey at Thanksgiving but if I had my druthers the genocidal event that I would lose on the misbegotten birds would be epic and result in the extinction of their entire, useless species.

I didn't always feel this way about turkeys or Thanksgiving, once it was one of my favourite holidays. It was a time for my family to gather and spend time with each other. My family was close and supportive, the meals were wonderful. Then, my father had the idea to 'pick out our turkey'. I don't know whose brilliant concept it was, but a few different local farmers came up with the idea to go and pick out the turkey you would eat for Thanksgiving. It was like looking in a tank of lobsters and choosing the one you would consume for dinner. It really is a grotesque practice. The idea of looking the animal in the eyes that you would eventually have killed and

prepared for you is abhorrent to me now, but I suppose at the time I was just a kid and it never really crossed my mind.

We were driving out to the farm to choose the turkey that would be slaughtered, dressed and prepared for us to take home over the next few days. Then we would prepare it the rest of the way in our own home for Thanksgiving dinner when we came across a huge rafter blocking the road. A rafter of wild turkeys is something to behold, they are nothing like the domesticated ones you regularly eat. These birds can fly up to ninety kilometers an hour and can run up to forty kilometers an hour. They are graced with talons and very sharp beaks. Turkeys are omnivores, so when you tuck into your thanksgiving meal you are consuming something that not only eats grain but also meat of various kinds. As a result of this fact, the wild variety of turkey are skilled hunters and will fight fiercely to defend themselves and their young. There are also beliefs that the wild turkey, especially, is not as stupid as most people think. We often transpose the visual and make judgement on the mental from it. Because the turkey is an odd looking bird, we decide that it is stupid. I can tell you from experience that is not the case.

The drive to the farm was a warm one that day. We were at the cusp of the change between autumn and winter, that time of year when the weather is changeable and could be much warmer than you would expect. As a result, the windows of the car were down as we were allowing fresh air to come in and circulate. As we crested the hill, we came across the rafter which had blocked the road. For the most part the very large group of huge birds were oblivious to us. It is interesting that back in the 1930s wild turkeys were almost hunted to extinction, now they have a population

approaching ten million across North America. The rafters have invaded many farming areas around Eastern Ontario in Canada where they have often become dangerous pests. In lieu of their once almost extinction, the Fish and Wildlife agency only issue very few licenses to hunt the wild birds, despite their huge increase in population. At any rate, my father, both amused and annoyed by the rafter blocking the road to our destination stated, quite loudly, “To hell with going to the farm, maybe we should just grab one of these guys for dinner!”

They shouldn’t have taken notice or understood, they were animals and by many accounts not the brightest of animals, but again I beg to differ. No sooner had my father’s voice pierced the silence when all of the birds lifted their heads at the same time and stared directly at the car. The scratching and gobbling sounds of the birds ceased and we were treated with the most uncomfortable silence. I could tell it had shaken my father, because even as he outwardly joked about the birds seemingly understanding him, he rolled up his window and used the electric switch to do the same throughout the car. What happened from there was a tense stand off with my father wanting to continue driving forward and the birds standing their ground. He had no desire to drive through them, potentially causing injury to the animals and damage to his car but the birds simply would not move. As a result, dad honked his horn and started to roll, slowly at first through the rafter. It was at this point that the silence the turkeys were maintaining was broken as the galliformes started making a ‘*putt putt*’ sound as my father started slowly rolling through the flock. It was at this point that dozens of new toms seemed to fly in and took position in front of us on the road. Almost in unison, they began to make a red-faced twittering sound, lowered their heads and started to flex their wings. It was at this point my usually humane and

calm father panicked and increased his speed. I am unsure how many birds were injured or killed as we moved through them, I only know that once he cleared the rafter our speed increased and away we went down the road.

We were all shaken by the events, we know to give wild animals such as bears and coyotes a wide berth. In Canada we even know enough to show the self-named Canada Goose respect as a dangerous creature. I can honestly say that no one I have spoken to ever considered the potential danger posed by a wild turkey. My mother quietly sobbed upset both by the aggression shown us and the carnage my father left behind on the road. My brothers and I just silently gaped unsure of how to react. One way or another, we certainly weren't very interested in picking out the turkey we would use for dinner that year. In fact, it was my mother who quietly said "Maybe we'll have ham this year" as my father plotted a course to take us home and away from the hellscape that this farming community had become to us. At that point we thought the horror show we had been subjected to was over, as I'm sure you've already guessed that was not the case.

My father's Cutlass is probably the car I remember the most from my youth, it was the fanciest car we had ever had to that time, including exciting doodads like automatic locks and windows. Outside of that, I can't really tell you how good of a car it was as often children who aren't of driving age don't notice much when it comes to cars. It was large, probably a major gas guzzler, and felt very safe, at least until the rafter descended on us. Now, I know what you're thinking, turkeys don't fly. Well, when you are talking about overly plump domesticated turkeys bound for your dinner table then you are mostly correct. Generations of inter and inbreeding have

created the wobbly birds we are used to seeing wandering on farms. They might be able to get a few feet above the ground before their lack of bodily aerodynamics takes them down. Wild turkeys, however, are not encumbered by selective breeding and can fly very effectively. They flew fast and they flew furious as they dropped down on the Cutlass from above. We felt every one of their about twenty pound bodies landing. We also could hear them tearing at the vinyl on the top of the car. I could see their claws and beaks. I would learn later that turkeys are actually descendants of velociraptors, you know the smart and deadly little dinosaurs from those Jurassic movies? Apparently the wishbone of the bird is a remnant of that dinosaur lineage. Now, forty-five million years separate the bird from its murderous cousin, but still some genetic behaviours do remain.

As the bloodthirsty birds tore into the car, my father panicked anew. Looking back on it, this was probably a fair reaction to a flock of hitherto comic looking and benign animals that we regularly ate as food attacking us. As a result of his resurgent loss of composure he slammed on the breaks suddenly while we were travelling about eighty kilometers an hour. The result was immediate and catastrophic as both my parents shot forward and slammed their heads into the pre-safety measures dashboard. The force of the impact rendered my father immediately unconscious while my mother suffered a gout of blood running down her forehead. Myself and my two brothers in the back seat we were momentarily dazed before we started fumbling with our seat belts to exit the car which was currently under siege. As I was the youngest, my mother immediately went to help me after extricating herself, blood running into her eyes, obscuring her vision. During all of this the sharp talons and beaks of the galliformes tore at the top of the car and that haunting *putt putt putt* sound continued.

While she worked with me to release myself, my mother flailed wildly at the onslaught of birds and I knew they were tearing at her as well. My brothers, being much older, had already freed themselves and had made for a copse of trees not too far from where we came to our abrupt stop.

Soon, my mother and I exited the car, all the while she was beating at one of the large and nasty birds that had alighted on her and was attacking her. Fresh wounds of crimson sprouted in various places on her shoulders and chest as she shielded me from the maniacal animal. As for my father, my mother kept telling me not to look back as we ran. Still, I couldn't help it. From our vantage point I could see several large brown bodies had broken through and entered the car. In his unconscious state, my father didn't stand a chance as blood and viscera seemed to be torn and tossed about the scene. I could have sworn I saw one of the malignant fowl holding a single brown eye in its malformed beak but that could have just been the jumbled mind of a child. I like to tell myself that it wasn't real, but I know it was. I also knew that our own trials weren't done yet as we ran to join my brothers I could hear that accursed *putt putt* sound behind us and the sky was full with the sound of their flapping wings.

There was an immediate change from bright autumnal light to the shadows that only a canopy of trees can create, the result was an ill-boding gloom that now covered what was left of my family. This twilight effect was enhanced by the sounds of the murderous birds advancing on our location. We took small comfort that the trees would slow down their advance and mean they could not as effectively, nor quickly, fly after us. At this point, we were all sobbing, my older brothers and myself scared almost beyond reason and my mother bloody. All of us were mourning the loss of

father, but that couldn't be the single most important thing at the moment, survival coming to the fore. It was while we worked deeper into what turned out to be more a forest than just a small ribbon of green we started to notice the birds closing on us again.

Currently scientists believe that the fastest a human being can achieve running is thirty kilometers an hour. Our fastest sprinter attained twenty-seven and a half kilometers an hour for a very short duration. Most healthy adult humans run between ten and fifteen, compared to us those birds with a top running speed of forty kilometers per hour were damned fast. We only had one logical response to try and escape their attack, run into different directions. While there were more than enough of the galliformes to easily chase us down, we hoped that by thinning their numbers on each of us, it would make the attack less severe and potentially facilitate our survival. And so we took off in three different directions, my older brothers running off separately and me still hand in hand with my mother. As we ran there were several things about wild turkeys that we didn't know that could have aided in our escape.

It turns out these birds are a true, predatory species and as a result their eyesight is unbelievably good. What do I mean by unbelievably good? A wild turkey has vision that is three times better than human twenty twenty eyesight and it also has peripheral vision that grants a field of view of two hundred seventy degrees. As long as we were in sight of the feathered monsters, we would never get away. I have also learned since that their hearing can detect distant sounds much better than humans. The area the that the galliforme falls down is it has a lousy sense of smell. This meant that if we could

find a way to hide that broke the line of sight with the birds, we might be able to escape.

As we ran, both my mother and I had grabbed branches from the forest floor and had taken to swinging at the misbegotten birds whenever they closed in on us. At one point I can remember my mother muttering, “We have to get help or hide...” and that’s when I pointed to the large amount of leaves that had fallen to the forest floor. She looked at me for a second and nodded before taking a swing that seemed fairly crippling at one of the turkeys. With our immediate sight lines clear of the birds we began to bury ourselves in leaves. I won’t lie, it was gross. If anyone has ever done this they know that any number of insects and creepy crawlies exist in the fallen leaves during autumn, the leaves themselves are an ecosystem. The moistness and stench of the decomposing leaves is something that I will always remember and still when taking walks in the autumn I am assaulted with memories when faced with collections of leaves. Still though, you do what you have to do in order to survive. At this point, I have no doubt that my mother spared more than a casual thought to my brothers who had been inadvertently left to fend for themselves.

While we remained under the bed of leaves we could hear the arrival of the wretched birds and hoped they couldn’t make heads or tails of where we had disappeared to. It was at this point we started to hear a most unwelcome sound as the birds began to scratch about the fallen leaves. Another fun turkey fact that I later learned is that a turkey’s sense of touch is so well developed that it can feel an ant under its talons as it scratches on the ground. The one thing we were aware of, however, was that the galliformes were moving closer and closer to us and if this continued they would soon

find us. As it seemed like all would be lost we heard a sound that was both unfamiliar to us and very welcome given the situation, the explosion of a shotgun and then the sound of several land fowl scattering. We would find out later that my older brother had made his way to a nearby farm with several of the birds chasing him and one hanging by its talons from his scalp. The farmer acted quickly to help my brother, grabbing the shotgun used for pests and the gun toting saviour was brought to help the rest of us.

When medical attention was finally rendered to us, we were a pretty sorry lot. I had come away only with scratches and abrasions. I only needed a couple dozen stitches and for that I was lucky. My mother had suffered serious wounds and was suffering blood loss, as one of the talons had almost nicked an artery. One the beasts had torn off her left ear, something cosmetically troubling but at least she had retained her hearing. My eldest brother had major lacerations to his scalp and there were sections of it that still can't regrow hair. There were scratches and cuts down his spine that required four times the number of stitches I had received. My middle brother had lost his right eye and had scars on his face that would never heal, his lower lip had also been torn partially torn off. You already know about my father.

So that's why we don't celebrate thanksgiving anymore and we don't eat turkey. I wish the terrible creatures were all destroyed, however I also hope that if we don't eat them, they won't try to eat us.