

Wild turkeys make Long Island comeback; hunters cheer

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For decades, the closest most Long Islanders got to a wild turkey was likely a shot glass of the bird's namesake Kentucky bourbon.

No more. Thanks to state efforts to reintroduce them after more than a century of absence, an estimated 3,000 wild turkeys now strut, gobble and preen from farm fields on the East End to suburban cul-de-sacs near Nassau's Muttontown Preserve.

"I was doing a kitchen near Smithtown, and about three feet from the door there was a turkey looking at me," said Anthony Lupo, a contractor and enthusiastic sportsman from Nesconset who usually goes upstate to hunt the prized game birds. "Normally I would say they are a very wary bird," he said. "But the situation we have on Long Island this year is the birds have never been hunted."

That peaceful existence is set to change Saturday, when local hunters will get their first crack in decades at landing a Thanksgiving gobbler for the table.

The Long Island turkey season runs from Saturday to next Wednesday, when licensed hunters with turkey permits may bag one bird apiece on properties in Suffolk where hunting is allowed. The state Department of Environmental Conservation held hunter training sessions last month where Lupo and others dispensed key safety tips. Among them: Don't walk around using a turkey call, lest other hunters mistake you for a bird.

For hunters and conservationists, the season reflects the remarkable success of 50 years of species restoration.

Wild turkeys are doing well enough here that they've spurred nuisance complaints from farmers and residents who say the big birds are damaging their property. Male turkeys, or toms, grow to about 2 1/2 feet tall, weigh around 25 pounds and leave behind sizable droppings.

"They're dirty, they make a mess," said Lisa Lolis, clerk for the Village of Muttontown.

This fall the village applied for permits to get rid of five turkeys after residents said they were wandering in the road and soiling yards. The flock moved on before the village used the permits, she said.

A part of Island history

When European colonists first arrived here, New York's woods were thick with turkeys. But as forest gave way to farmland, the birds disappeared from Long Island and much of the state by the mid-19th century, said DEC wildlife biologist Michael Schiavone. Unregulated year-round hunting and diseases from domestic poultry further reduced their numbers.

The trend reversed as some upstate farms fell out of cultivation in the 1900s. By midcentury, wild turkeys had crossed back over the Pennsylvania border to take advantage of New York's expanded habitat. In 1958, state conservation workers began trapping wild birds in remote areas of the state and releasing them elsewhere to establish new flocks.

Long Island got its turkey infusion between 1992 and 1994, when birds from central and western New York were transferred to Hither Hills State Park in East Hampton and South Haven County Park in Brookhaven, Schiavone said.

Those flocks have since expanded. People report turkeys on the North and South forks, and along the William Floyd corridor from Rocky Point to the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge near Shirley. "It's a tribute to the work done by DEC staff, but also to the adaptability of turkeys," said Schiavone.

Able to survive harsh winters in remote New York forests, the birds also thrive in more developed areas like Long Island, which offers a variety of habitats and feeding spots. Patches of woodland provide safe roosts at night. Open fields make excellent nurseries for turkeys to rear their poults, though eggs and young remain vulnerable to predators such as raccoons and possums.

Love 'em or hate 'em?

Some residents consider the turkeys a delightful surprise. East Norwich antiques dealer Phil Chasen had his first sighting two weeks ago, when a flock wandered onto his driveway. "One of them just flew to the top of my van," said Chasen, who posted photos of the encounter on his blog.

But the DEC has gotten complaints from East End farmers who accuse turkeys of ravaging vineyards. State biologists say turkeys get a bad rap, and that studies with remote cameras at upstate vineyards show the real culprits to be raccoons and smaller birds, such as grackles.

Wild turkeys that have lost their fear of humans - which can happen if residents feed them - can advance with alarming directness, as Maria Pollatos of Muttontown learned in September.

Pollatos, 34, took her 3-year-old son outside to view a flock that briefly took up residence on Farm Hill Lane. Her son "started running and they ran after him," said Pollatos.

While generally peaceful, male turkeys can aggressively defend territory from rivals, including their reflections in windows or shiny car panels. Such displays are common in the spring, when, in the words of DEC biologist Chip Hamilton, "they're looking to attract ladies."