

MONTEREY NEWS

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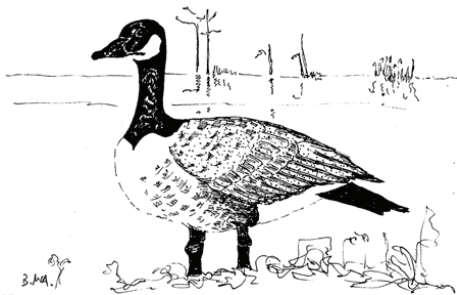


Two Big Birds and Us

Compared to most birds, we are very big. There are other differences, too. Most of us have arms but birds have wings instead. Then there are the feathers! Most birds have feathers and most of us do not, though at least two of us, famous in legend, tried feathers. Daedalus the inventor father, stuck the feathers on with wax, as I recall, and next thing you know, he and his beloved son were flying. We know how that ended and not many of us have tried it again, unless you count skydiving. But if it were not for the little parachutes strapped to our backs, we would all end up like Icarus when his wax melted. Done for.

Not all birds fly, especially the very big ones. They have long strong legs and can run fast and far. There are smaller flightless birds and some of these are good swimmers, even under water. Some others are extinct now, which looks like it could happen to any of us, with or without wings.

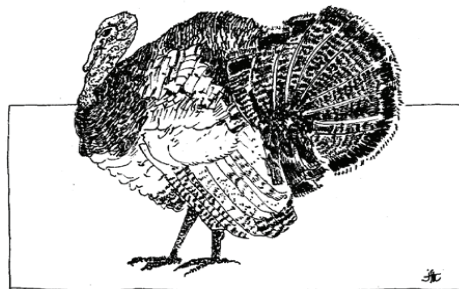
We have two big birds of the season here in our northeast bioregion. The Canada goose is overhead, often out of sight, flying alone or in family groups. Aldo Leopold noted that sometimes geese fly singly, but the flocks are likely to be present in groups of six or in multiples of six, since six is the most common number for a goose family, and geese are family creatures. A flock of many makes a marvelous music, random both in rhythm and in pitch. A lone goose strikes us as lonely, with its solo honk honk



. . . honk. I should say that Edward Howe Forbush, our state ornithologist about a century ago, pointed out that the call is said to be a honk, but "I have never heard the h or the k."

The other big bird of note in autumn, but really anytime, is the wild turkey. Somehow the turkey got linked to Thanksgiving in our legends and our selective understanding of fairly recent human interaction here in the Bay State. We learned that the friendly Indians welcomed the weary pilgrims after their long sea voyage in the Mayflower and cooked them up a feast of cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and baked turkey with stuffing. The turkey became the symbol of this myth and as kids in school we did our best to draw pictures of Squanto and maybe Miles Standish sitting down to a turkey dinner together, one man wearing feathers on his head and the other a sort of hat like you can still see on signs for the Mass Pike. These used to feature a pilgrim hat with an arrow sticking through it, implying that bows and arrows were brought to bear. The implication also is that the Indian was not such a good shot and only managed to put the arrow through the hat. This is insulting. The Indians were expert archers. So the arrow has been removed from the pilgrim hat signs in these recent decades. There's no hint of the Indian at all on the Mass Pike signs now.

In our childhood we drew what we



learned from the storybooks. We knew turkeys mean Thanksgiving, and these birds are big, with remarkable details like a "snood" and a "brush" or "beard." Some also have spurs. These are good details to note about the turkey, the snood being a "secondary sexual characteristic" of the male, a long dollop of skin that hangs over the beak and can get much longer very quickly, also change color: blue, red, white. In fact the warty bald head and neck of the turkey can flash these color changes, too, in a glorious show meant to

impress ladies and discourage lesser males. Those bumps on the skin are not really warts, they are called caruncles.

Besides all this, the male turkey can famously spread his tail in a huge fan nearly circular, each feather equipped with a sheath attachment to the body and with special muscles to raise and spread that tail fast, and hold it there. In the storybook examples we saw of the turkey tail fans, the tips of the feathers were white.

Our New England wild turkeys do not have tail feathers with white tips. If you can't get a close look at a turkey tail feather, you can always check out the label on a bottle of Wild Turkey in the liquor store. This is an accurate painting. The feathers are banded black on brown, with a brown or chestnut tip. The banding is not hard-lined, more like a woven or batik pattern with soft edges.

It is our domesticated turkeys that have white tips on the tail feathers. They are a different sort of turkey, with their own history. When Cortez came to the New World he was looking for gold. Disappointed, he committed genocide on the native Arawak people and took into slavery many, many of them, to sell back in Europe. He took other things, including the local wild turkeys, the kind still found wild in what we now call Mexico, and in the southwestern United States. The tips of the tail feathers of these turkeys are white.

Turkeys were a big hit in Europe and survived there as domesticated farm animals. When religious persecution drove some white folks to cross the sea to New England, they brought turkeys along to raise here. The well-travelled white tailed turkeys did not thrive, not adapted to our rugged climate. Neither were the pilgrims, and many did not survive. Those who made it did so thanks to the generous people who already lived here, and to the native turkeys, like the ones on the bourbon bottle. The rest of the story is history and we need to learn it, so we can tell true stories, draw accurate pictures, and not repeat it. — Bonner McAllester