

# Nonnative turkeys gobble up important habitat for native species in the Applegate

BY SUZIE SAVOIE

Large flocks of wild turkeys roam the Applegate watershed, from the valley bottom into the foothills. While some people like the turkeys, many feel there are too many and see them as destructive to farms, gardens, and the environment. Some people even refer to turkeys as “walking weeds.” The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) receives many turkey-related complaints each year, but they still manage wild turkeys to ensure their presence on the landscape for hunting—despite the fact that they are a nonnative species and very little is known about their impacts on native species.

In the late 1800s, due to over-hunting and deforestation for farms and settlements, turkey populations in their native range, including parts of the Southwest and areas east of the Mississippi, had declined to as low as 200,000. Out of fear that turkeys were going extinct, they were introduced into every state except Alaska. An estimated 6.5 million turkeys now inhabit the United States. Conservation efforts in the East—their native habitat—have been very successful.

The first attempts to establish turkeys in Oregon began in 1899. Since then, at least 14,399 turkeys have been intentionally introduced by ODFW during more than 584 releases or relocations, and it is now estimated that there are at least 45,000 nonnative wild turkeys in Oregon.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife began releasing turkeys in 1908, and since has released turkeys throughout California. They stopped



Nonnative wild turkey eating a snake in the Upper Applegate.  
Photo: Suzie Savoie.

releasing turkeys in 1999, partly due to lawsuits by ecology-focused organizations, such as the California Native Plant Society, which objected to the turkeys’ impact on rare and endangered plant species, and partly due to other opposition, such as that by the California State Parks and Recreation Department, which identified many potential negative ecological impacts from turkeys, including competition with native ground-dwelling bird species and consumption of endangered reptiles and amphibians. A 2001 study in Sonoma County showed that turkeys directly caused a decrease in terrestrial herbivores, decomposers, and invertebrates, all fundamental species for a functioning ecosystem.

Like many nonnative species, turkeys can cause interactions that cascade through

the ecosystem with negative consequences. Turkeys eat plants, but are generalist foragers and voracious eaters, consuming almost anything in their path, including caterpillars (butterflies, moths, etc.), cocoons and chrysalises (butterflies, moths, etc.), grasshoppers, crickets, slugs, stinkbugs, snails, beetles, snakes, praying mantises, frogs, toads, tadpoles, lizards, salamanders, ants, bees, wasps, and spiders.

Wild turkeys can eat small snakes like a robin eating a worm, and they will peck apart and kill larger snakes. I have observed this many times and recently got a photo of a turkey eating a snake in the Upper Applegate. Since turkeys showed up in my neighborhood a few years ago, there has been a noticeable drop in the number of snakes, lizards, and toads, including beautiful California mountain king snakes.

Even though diet studies have routinely shown invertebrates in larval and chrysalis stages are frequently consumed by turkeys—larvae that should become butterflies, moths, ground-nesting solitary bees, beetles, and other important pollinator species—there is no research about the direct impacts on native pollinators.

The Applegate is home to the Siskiyou Mountains salamander, but no research has been done to determine if turkeys pose a threat to this rare, endemic, and iconic species, despite the fact that turkeys are known to eat salamanders. We also have rare terrestrial snails that are listed as sensitive species, and one study of turkey diets found that snails contributed more than 50 percent of the diet of some female turkeys when laying eggs.

The biodiversity crisis is caused by many factors, but there are ways to slow population declines and prevent species from becoming endangered or extinct. ODFW should be managing turkeys to keep their populations down, rather than continuing to help the expansion of turkey populations.

One of the easiest things you can do to help is not feed turkeys intentionally (e.g., putting food out for them) or unintentionally (e.g., bird feeders, pet food left outside). Although I’m a vegetarian and don’t hunt myself, I hear wild turkey can make a good holiday dinner.

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