

One wild turkey hen endured my trail underneath the pecan trees in the yard as I went to and from the barn and the house during the night duty of calving heifers the past season. She flew routinely from the tree by the gate down to a mesquite far enough from the corrals to feel safe.

By Christmas, I stopped bucking sideways from the shock of flushing her every time the heifers needed checking in our star-lighted clinic. Soon, she began making shorter flights at fewer intervals from human activity.

She also became an important part of the exchange over the wire with the redcaps leasing for hunting. Having this one resident straggler left from the winter migration off the 09 Divide rounded my sales presentation to cover spring and fall turkey season.

Say an old boy in Dallas calls looking for a lease. The reception on the cordless phone is clear enough to catch the ruckus of the hen tearing off the roost to give a live, tingling preview of wild turkeys in flight.

Next comes the clincher: "I'm out in the backyard. Did you hear that bluehead take flight?"

Followed by a smooth switch: "Can you tell if it's a full moon where you live? Shore is pretty and quiet here tonight."

Then wham: "Seems life's better sleeping behind unlocked doors, under open windows, listening to soft hoofbeats of antlered beasts and gentle wingbeats of wild fowl flying aloft to a roost right by the bedroom walls."

With plenty of shelled corn to eat, the most popular narcotic of the game ranges, turkeys winter on the Divide by keeping close contact with the feeders. At seven or eight bucks for a sack off the grocery store porch, an early feeding program entices a flock of turkeys to stay in one area.

Miss a few feedings, however, and they'll take off for the acorns and pecans down on the river. Once the old crow begins to shrink and wrinkle from thin rations, turkeys don't stay around like herders, hoping for a January chinook about as likely to hit as Mrs. William J. Clinton resigning her Senate seat to go back to Arkansas to start wearing gingham bonnets and take up making baby quilts for her grandchildren. (Oh, all right, I concede that's a weak, over-length simile; February was a cold, tough month up here.)

Winter before last we made the mistake of feeding maize to the turkeys and quail coming around the house. The birds became so dependent upon being fed that one evening on a late grocery shopping expedition to Angelo, I bought a five dollar sack of wild bird seed to keep from missing a feeding.

I justified purchasing seeds from the supermarket at a tad more than the maize cost at the Mertzon wool house by buying small eggs instead of the jumbo size. It seemed sensible, saving on eggs to feed birds.

The practice goes back to the basic drill in seventh grade business class to sell dry cows to buy feed to keep too many cows and calves on ranges overgrazed and out of grass. Mertzon boys missed so much school in the 1940s, helping fight prairie fires in the winter off the World War Two bombing ranges, that we knew more about ashes and soot from wet tow sacks dipped in water barrels than we did interest tables and converting decimals to percentages.

The wild bird seeds stopped the turkeys and the quail from coming to feed. They were too housebroke to eat wild bird seeds. Also, the 50-pound sack contained over 90 percent millet and a few handfuls of sunflower seeds stirred in a sprinkling of maybe rice hulls or ground corn shucks. Caged birds can be starved to eating millet, but be

sure, unless your choice of bird tunes is a whistler's rendition of the St. Louis Blues.

Talk about returning to the wild. The third morning the front yard opened so devoid of birds it would make the portrayal of the radioactive blighted springtime in "The Silent Spring" seem a rich interlude teeming with new life. Far in the stillness, quail barked warnings; farther away, turkeys clucked tones of distrust.

But every night, the one turkey hen still roosted in the pecan trees, oblivious and unaffected by the other birds' migration. She became gentle, maybe too gentle. Two mornings ago, from this writing, her feathers were strewn across the road leading to the horse trap. She was slain and consumed by the bobcat that hunters reported seeing several nights last season.

My prop to sell turkey hunting is gone. Only house pet we had is dead. I gathered her feathers to keep in the garage among the horns, spurs, talons, and beards kept for bait. I see right now I am going to have to develop a new script and a new line without her as a prop ...