

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

## **A Turkey Tail**

*Sheltering a wild turkey about to hatch a late brood of chicks becomes a labor of love*



By J. Morton Galetto CU Maurice River

She was at our backdoor for nearly two and half weeks before I even noticed her. The first week I couldn't really be held accountable since we were lazing on Cape Cod. But a week and a half and completely oblivious? In fact it wasn't until I picked up a hose one foot from her nest that my awareness peaked.

In all honesty it was more a testament to her great camouflage skills and

statuesque nature. Not even our hunting dogs detected her. After two days I decided she must be injured; after all it was mid-August. So I took a broom and ever so gently persuaded her to move, and with great reluctance she shifted her body to the side about two inches, revealing her prospective descendants, her eggs. Now mind you, turkeys were breeding in May and June and incubation only takes 28 days. So if she were successful this would be a late brood. Ah, she must have lost her first brood and double-clutched. A do-over.



Her cohorts' broods were already chicken-sized, most having been born in June and July. Many young would be eaten by fox and coyote, or maybe even by some large birds of prey.

With Thanksgiving right around the corner, you had to see this coming. It's time to talk turkey - American wild turkey -, a great comeback story. Yes, I was sheltering a nesting female turkey.

My head was a swirl of questions. *Wow, how long had she been there? If she was successful we would soon know. Our spaniels, yikes.* Her steadfast ability to stay put must have kept her from emitting much of a scent. It is common for turkeys to nest along a wall where winds are blocked from revealing their presence. The approach of predators is also restricted in several directions, like a fortress of sorts. And there is always the element of being further concealed and more sheltered.

Never once did I find her to be off her eggs over the course of the following two weeks. This was a suspenseful time for us. I would ask visitors to quietly peek over the wall by the back door and tell me what they saw. Without guidance they invariably replied, "Nothing." She was hidden in the spice patch surrounded by rosemary and

sage, perhaps a sinister omen of future herbal encounters. People's inability to see her even when she was pointed out made me feel much better about my spotting skills. Mind you, this is likely a 16 lb. bird. Her prehistoric featherless head without a visible body was hard for most people to even identify. Some folks guessed she was a peacock!

She and I formed a relationship. Before work I would quietly wish her a nice day. In the beginning she responded with a frown. In time she seemed more relaxed and accustomed to our comings and goings. I kept a distance, having seen turkeys fight and a rooster tear a bag to shreds in about 5 seconds. I knew if she wanted to hurt an intruder she could do some damage, or at very least give a person with a bad heart a run for his money.



Then on August 28<sup>th</sup> it happened: the big day. Using the egg tooth on the tip of their beak the chicks whittled away at the widest point of the oval top (opposite the pointed end), making a circular escape hatch of sorts. This protuberance will be lost as the chick ages. Each egg wiggled as a sign of the inner struggle to emerge. Once they had all exited, their nine creamy-colored speckled brown eggs lay motionless. In short course the chicks' feathers dried and they began to explore their world.



Shortly after birth is when I discovered our downy nine-some pecking about in the wooded area abutting our yard. And there she was in all her glory looking over her brood. Each avian species is born in one of a number of different developmental stages, or gradients of precociality. Turkeys are precocial 2, the most independent, while the most dependent are altricial. *Precocial* young have downy feathers, open eyes, are mobile, self-feed, and the parents are absent. The difference at level 2 is that the parents remain present. At the other end of the spectrum are *altricial* young, which are featherless, closed-eyed, immobile, and must be fed by their parents.

When I kept my distance she just seemed only mildly concerned about my presence. But as I tried to get some baby pictures she turned up the heat. She came through our fern bed sporting a strut and determined frown. She sized me up and returned to her brood in the woods. Then I made another advance to get a treasured shot to share with her fans. This time she was clearly unhappy. She approached me more quickly and with greater determination; she and her chicks were absolutely not participating in my photo shoot. The way she lifted her tail and head was clearly a warning. Her level of resolve successfully put me

off. Most chicks would not survive the year and she certainly wasn't going to risk her lot to some silly old lady with a camera. Not even if that person wished her well each morning!



I stood over the once-occupied nest and contemplated what I had read about egg shells. Their shape gives them unique strength, so that when pushed with even distribution they can withstand many pounds of pressure. This is because the pressure is generated radially, or dispersed throughout. So if you squeeze an egg in your fist it is impossible to break, unless you dig in with just one finger. It's all about curvature. Remember we are talking about an equal pressure, not a concentrated tap. I thought about how the shells are permeable, allowing the chick to breathe. And then I sighed

a deep sigh to myself, thinking about how I would miss my daily "top of the morning" greeting. I took one last glance into the forest and they were gone, sheltered under great wings. Going into Thanksgiving I am grateful for the natural marvels of life.