



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association  
Photo courtesy of Karl Backus

## Monthly News & Updates

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### November 2022 Newsletter

# *Turkeys on Parade in Pa'auilo Mauka*

## *Musings on Feral Turkey Behavior*



*A gaggle of turkeys in my mauka Pa'auilo backyard.*

Ruth Bennett  
PMKCA Vice Prez

In all my 70+ years, I've never seen as many turkeys in one place and time as pass through my mauka Pa'auilo world almost every day. There is something about this topography that turns three connecting pastures into a turkey super-highway. In most seasons and most conditions, the birds are coming and going, focused intently on their needs and destinations. My property is a "rest stop" for the turkey parade. (Maybe I should consider putting in a comfort station. More on that later.)

I've become a fascinated observer of turkey behavior on this highway – traffic jams, road

rage, moms driving their kids, the show-off hot-rod crowd.

Since it's the traditional time to celebrate turkeys, I'm sharing my curiosity about these birds with you.

### **A gaggle of turkeys on a typical fall day.**

Every morning, just as the sun is about to clear the tops of the trees to the east of my home, the turkeys come down from their roosts somewhere below my property and begin their daily procession. As they move uphill, they chatter among themselves, do their wing-flapping warm-up exercises, and sort themselves into their proper gender and social hierarchy.

During the fall and winter months, I've counted more than 25 turkeys in this morning parade. The hens begin the procession, moving purposefully, as if they know they control the flock's future. They are followed by the toms, also motivated, intent on attracting hen attention, making an iridescent spectacle in the early sunlight.

The flock's first stop is the gravel surface of my parking area to pick up the day's supply of gizzard food-grinding material. Then a few try a drink of water from my garden pond. If I'm too late to move them off, they sometimes leave a pungent "gift" on the bridge over the pond. The smell drives me out to clean it up. Even the fish hold their noses! (You see why I might consider a comfort station?)

Finally, off they go to the uphill neighbor's house to see if he has left anything edible for them and to forage among his coffee trees.

As the day wears down towards evening, they form up and are on the move again – this time downhill. I hear them coming before I see them. A straggler hen complains that she can't keep up, and two or three of the high-status girls start a squabble over who gets to lead the flock.

The toms follow, strutting and shimmering. They gobble at any sound they hear – my garage door closing, my sheep bleating, a distant roll of thunder. Sometimes, for the sheer hilarity of it, I gobble back at them. We carry on like that for a while, but I'm always the first to feel silly and stop my cackling.

In the final downhill stretch towards their nighttime roosting tree, for some incomprehensible reason, the gaggle of hens take off running at breakneck speed. What's that about? I'm impressed by how much they look like the dinosaurs in the movie, "Jurassic Park." The herd of galloping dinosaurs leap over a fallen tree where the frightened humans are huddled. I guess modern turkeys really ARE dinosaurs with feathers!

### **Toms, Tuxedos, and Tournaments**

In early spring, thoughts of both the toms and hens turn to... well, you know! The boys begin the mating season by improving their appearance, practicing their dancing and establishing ranking. A tom turkey's appearance in mating season is both beautiful and ridiculous. Feathers develop their deep green-gold-bronze iridescence, tail feathers grow long and showy, and various odd, colorful growths appear around their heads, necks and chests.



*Tom turkeys showing off.*

When a male turkey wants to impress, all of these “parts” are called into play. His head turns blue and his “snood,” a floppy growth on his head, flops over his bill. The “wattle” on his neck turns bright red. All of his iridescent feathers puff out and his tail feathers spread into a wide fan. At the peak of his display, he arches his neck and takes a few marching steps, shivering his brilliant feathers and scraping his wings on the ground. What hen could resist such a magnificent display!

Of course, all that fol-de-rol is simply about making more turkeys, and that’s the singular activity of the hens. Once they have been duly impressed by the toms, they get down to their own business.

### **Hens and Chicks and Destiny**

As spring moves along, I see fewer and fewer hens on the turkey highway. One by one, they disappear into the tall grass and shrubs along the gulch to make their nests and start laying eggs. Their nests are so hidden that I have walked within a few feet of a nesting hen without noticing her.

About a month after a hen disappears, if she’s smart and lucky, she reappears with her hatched family. By the time she brings them into view, they are firmly imprinted on her, and she on them. I’ve seen 14 tiny, carefree chicks surrounding one very worried and watchful hen.



*A hen and her chicks.*

Over the following weeks, every hen will lose some of her babies to mongooses, hawks, and owls (our native 'io and pueo), but she will defend aggressively any one of her chicks if they are in trouble. Even my cats know not to mess with a turkey mom and chicks.

The piercing “peep-peep-peep” of a lost, frightened turkey chick brings the hen to its rescue. The cry of a chick in distress has often brought *ME* out of my house and into the rain to reunite a chick with its mom. And when they are all together again, the hen will spread her wings and settle down in the grass. All the chicks run to her and bury themselves under her feathers. I imagine that, for a chick, there is nothing more comforting than to be under mom’s wings.

The chicks grow quickly and never seem to know how vulnerable they are. A chick’s life is blissful. But daily, weekly, the number of chicks following a hen decreases. I get attached to the turkey families and find myself in some serious contemplation on the beauty, and cruelty, of nature.

By summer, the remaining chicks have grown enough to defend themselves. Their wings have developed so that they can fly into trees if attacked. Everyone seems to relax and enjoy life. And without the distressing peeping from baby chicks, I can relax too.

### **Speaking “Turkey”**

I don’t have to be looking at any turkeys at all to get a sense of life among the birds; I hear them. There’s nothing melodious about turkey language, but what they say tells their stories.

Of course, the toms *gobble*, and their purpose for speaking is clear: “Gorgeous tom turkey over here!” But the hens are the talkers, and they have a lot to say:

*A single, sharp cluck* means “Danger!” The hen may have seen a mongoose and is warning her the flock or her chicks. When I look out, I’d see the hen with her hen friends, necks extended, staring into a patch of dense foliage where a mongoose is likely hidden.

*A soft, purring sound* means “All’s well.” The hen is reassuring her friends or her chicks that the mongoose has moved away, and the danger has passed. I hear this sound frequently as the hens and chicks meander around my home, sharing well-being with each other.

*A sharp, repeated cry* means “Wait for me!” The hen has lost sight of others in the flock

and feels vulnerable. The sound is so desperate that I find myself searching for the lost bird and shooing her towards her friends.

A *continuous, sharp barking* means a fight is in progress. I see one hen attacking another while the rest bark in encouragement or distress. It's a bird flock thing.

And of course, the chicks are constantly *chattering* their soft, "I'm here, Mom," sounds. I've raised abandoned turkey chicks, and those cheerful, naïve sounds are enchanting - even for a human!

**But wait: Are turkeys an invasive species?**

You may know that I'm concerned about invasive species in Hawai'i, and so I asked this question of the Big Island Invasive Species Committee ([www.biisc.org](http://www.biisc.org)): *Are feral turkeys considered invasive?* Kawehi Young of BIISC replied, "Turkeys are an introduced species and while they may be a nuisance to some, they don't cause enough economic and environmental harm to merit treatment as an invasive." So, I will continue to enjoy them in my world.

*Imagine this:* I, a human being, have found fascination and enchantment in these distant descendants of dinosaurs! If you have a chance to observe and interact with feral turkeys as they go about their wild wanderings in upcountry Hāmākua, you'll know what I mean.

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**Coming PMKCA Meetings & Events**

*Have a pleasant holiday season!!  
In January, 2023, PMKCA will meet again.*

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**Board of Directors Meeting**  
**Thursday, January 12, 2023 - 6PM**  
Location: TBD

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**GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING**  
**Tuesday, January 23, 2023 - 7PM**  
Location: Pa'auilo School

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Oh, and by the way,  
**Join PMKCA or Renew Your 2022 Membership!!**

**Mahalo to those of you who renewed your membership at the picnic meeting! If you missed that chance, dues are only \$20 per calendar year and help support so many great community activities.**

**Click the "Visit our website" link below and choose Membership/Dues. We offer a PayPal option, or mail a check made out to PMKCA, PO Box 408, Pa'auilo, HI 96776. Easy-peasy - and important!**

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Photo courtesy of Karl Backus