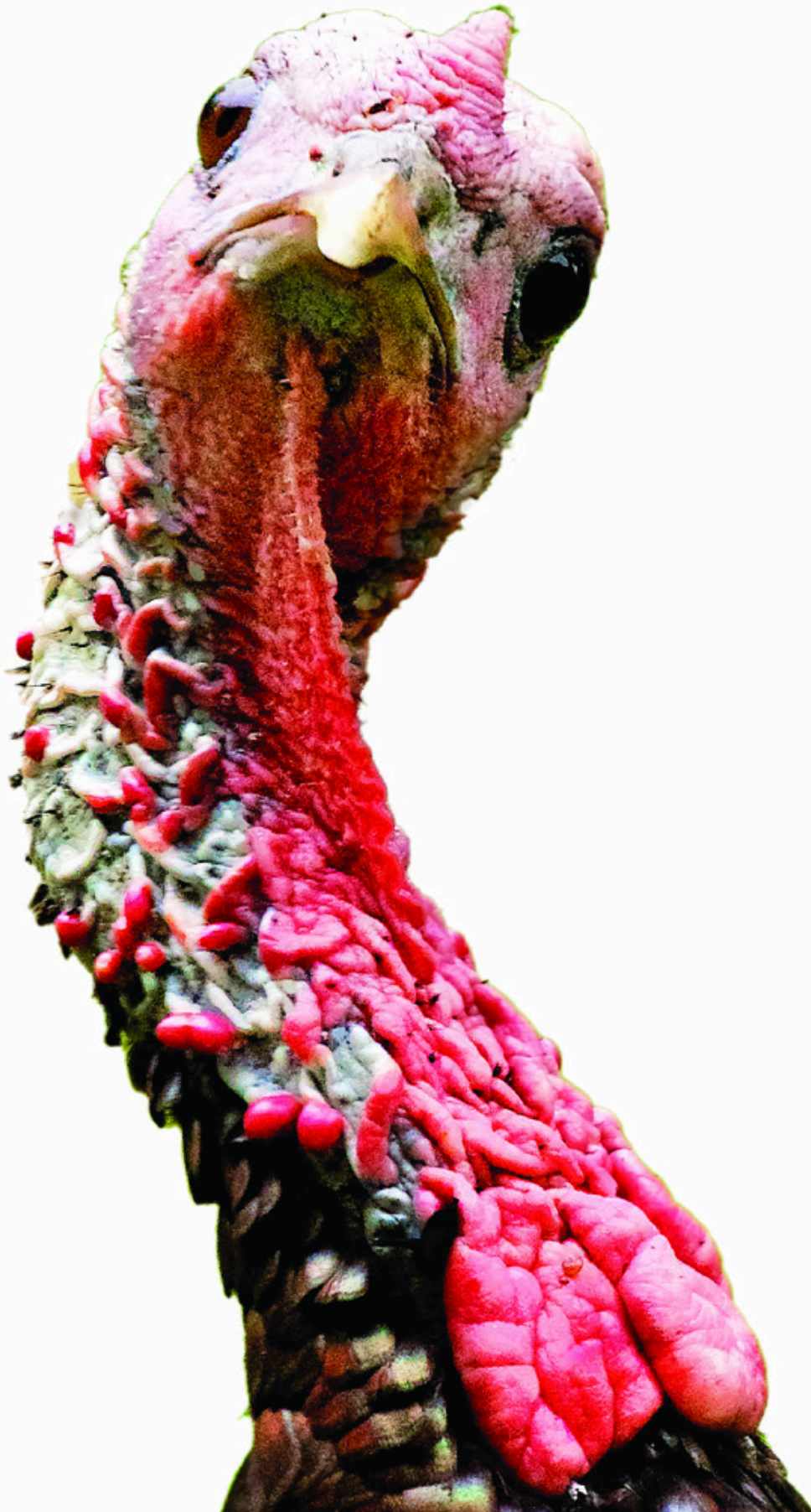


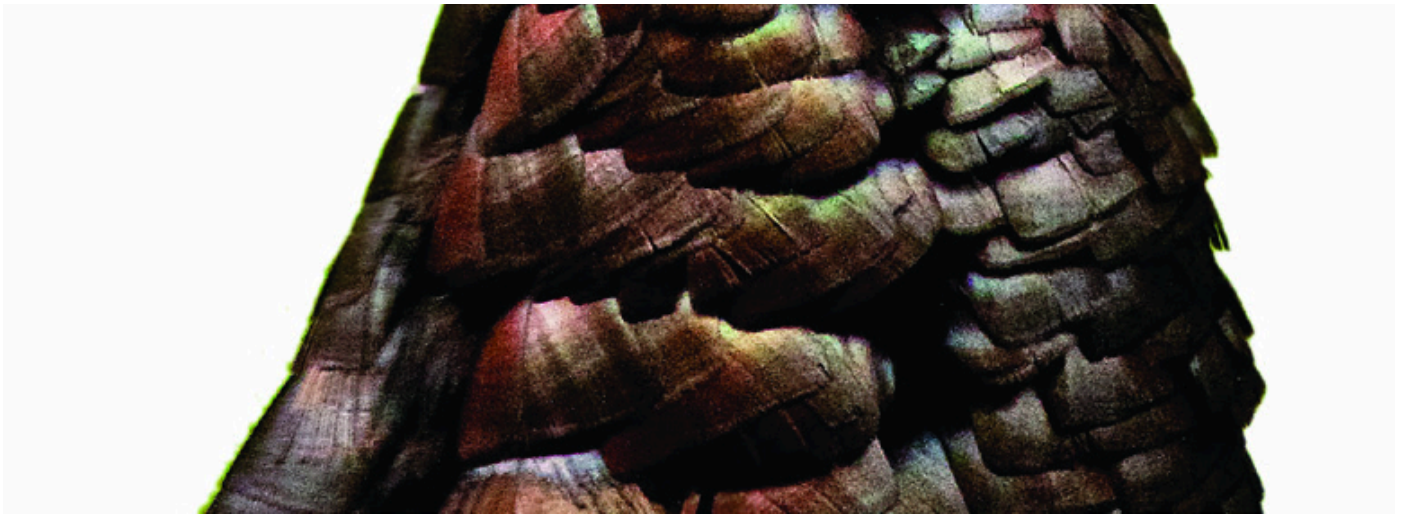
Grateful for the turkey crossing the road

Although the wild turkey is native to parts of North America, widespread deforestation and unregulated hunting led it to the brink of extinction by 1900



DAN PELLE/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW A wild turkey struts his stuff across Lincoln Street at 16th Avenue as vehicles slowed down to view the display last year in Spokane.





GETTY IMAGES

BY LINDA WEIFORD FOR THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

No other living creature can boast of having a wattle, gobble, snood and beard.

The largest game bird in North America, the wild turkey is coveted by hunters, marveled at by nature lovers and at times begrudged by city dwellers.

The turkey is also our nation's Thanksgiving icon. No, not the frozen Butterball version, but the gangly, free-range one that trots through fields and forests and in urban areas. If you live in Spokane's South Hill neighborhood, you've probably seen flocks – known as rafters – assembled in parks and along roadways.

Which is remarkable considering that wild turkeys, unlike deer or racoons, didn't even exist in Washington until the 20th century. Yet today, their statewide presence is cause for celebration among conservationists and hunters alike.

Although the wild turkey is native to parts of North America, widespread deforestation and unregulated hunting led it to the brink of extinction by 1900.

Then, during a massive conservation campaign to restore their populations, the bird was successfully introduced to the Pacific Northwest beginning in 1960.

“The comeback of the wild turkey is considered one of the greatest successes in wildlife conservation,” said Sarah Garrison, small game specialist with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Today, three of the nation’s five subspecies reside in Washington – Merriam’s and Rio Grande on the state’s eastern side and the Eastern turkey west of the Cascades – all transplanted from other states. Their populations are so stable that Washington is among only a few states where hunters can harvest three subspecies in a single spring hunting season, Garrison said.

The name of this feat? The Washington Wild Turkey Slam.

In Eastern Washington, wild turkey numbers remain high, with smaller yet stable populations west of the Cascades, Garrison explained.

In contrast, populations in parts of the Midwest and South are shrinking, a trend that began about 15 years ago, according to the National Wild Turkey Federation.

It is believed that habitat loss is one reason why, the conservation and education organization states on its website.

But turkeys aren’t in trouble in Washington.

Why is that? Location. Location. Location.

Eastern Washington, with its open woodlands, provides ideal habitat, Garrison said. The region’s trees are big enough for turkeys to roost in, while also offering “open canopies that allow grasses, shrubs and flowering plants to grow in the understory for food and nesting cover,” she said.

Of course, encountering wild turkeys on a deer trail is not the same as when they block traffic or peck at their reflection on your just-washed car. Conservation efforts have been so successful that they’ve flocked to urban and suburban areas such as Spokane, San Francisco, Minneapolis and Boston. Fewer predators, open spaces interspersed with trees and shrubs, and abundant food such as seeds, grass and berries make urban areas appealing

to wild turkeys, said Fish and Wildlife Department district wildlife biologist Mark Vekasy.

“It helps that they are so adaptable,” he said.

As tall as a toddler, round as a beach ball and at times noisy, they are a charming addition to city life but can also be a nuisance.

How to prevent human-turkey kerfuffles? First and foremost, “Don’t feed them,” Vekasy advised.

They’ll keep coming back and can get cranky when they don’t get what they want, he explained. (In New Hampshire, it is illegal to feed wild turkeys within 100 yards of a dwelling.) Also, in the pecking-order world of wild turkeys, you may be viewed as an underling. To prove you’re the one on top, “Don’t let turkeys intimidate you,” Vekasy said. Shout, wave a broom or umbrella, spray a water hose or display a leashed dog, he suggested.

Heck, put up a scarecrow.

After all, whether strutting and puffing their stuff on sidewalks or roosting on fence tops, wild turkeys may act like city slickers, but they’re still wild.