

Outdoors

One crazy turkey

We have no idea where she came from or how she found us, but a wild turkey hen simply walked into the yard of our ranch house in the brushlands of Webb County one day and adopted us.

I named this bird "Mahonia." I don't recall why; that's the scientific name of a prickly shrub common here in the Hill Country called "agarita." She displayed an unexpectedly vivid (and occasionally prickly) personality which seemed to us quite incongruous in a wild turkey.

Mahonia was anything but an orthodox turkey. Her plumage showed her to be a genuine wild turkey of the Rio Grande subspecies, with no hint of domestic blood. But by her behavior she might have been raised as a house pet.

She was beyond tame. Her confidence in the presence of humans, dogs, gentle whitetail bucks and motor vehicles verged on arrogance. We knew of at least one attempt to stock wild turkeys in the county, but the abundance of predators had doomed it to failure. Furthermore, biologists long ago realized that stocking pen-raised birds, even of authentic wild bloodlines, never succeeds, so Mahonia's tameness remained a mystery, as did the fact that she was still alive.

There was a corn feeder in the ranch house yard (a declared sanctuary where no shooting was allowed) and Mahonia took possession, defending it from any and all other wildlife, even including deer and javelinas.

There was also a stock tank nearby, so she had food and water and a safe roosting spot on the roof of the house. What she lacked, obviously, was companionship, and in the absence of other turkeys, humans would apparently have to do. She showed not the slightest fear of people and would run to meet our car as we arrived, even after a prolonged absence.

Mahonia loved cars. She would perch on the vehicle and try to make friends with her own reflection in the windows. If she happened to be on



Photos by John Wootters

Mahonia was fascinating to all the Wootters' ranch guests, like writers Gary Sitton, at left, and Craig Boddington, right.

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the hood or roof when we drove away, she'd struggle frantically to keep her footing until she fell off, and then she'd chase the departing vehicle for several hundred yards.

On the other hand, Mahonia despised dogs and made life miserable for our little poodle, Peso ... although it's hard to imagine how she could have confused a traditionally-groomed miniature poodle with a dangerous predator. Nevertheless, she'd charge across the yard to attack him even if Peso was in my arms! We had to carry a stout stick to defend the dog from the turkey on his daily walks – as ridiculous as that may be.

Mahonia was usually around the yard anytime we were at the ranch, but if she happened not to be in evidence I had only to step outside with a turkey caller and render a few yelps to bring her running as fast as she could. Her eagerness to find another turkey was pathetic.

I sometimes sat down and "chatted" with Mahonia, using a slate and striker or box call. She would respond to my turkey talk, and I listened carefully to her tonalities and inflections, learning to sound more like a real turkey. Mahonia undoubtedly made me a much better turkey caller, and she seemed to enjoy our sessions. Perhaps they made her feel less lonely.

She even taught me a new turkey vocalization. All hunters know the "fly-down cackle," heard when hens leave the roost in early morning, but Mahonia also had a "fly-up" cackle, which she gave just as she left the ground on her way to roost on the roof. This was a softer, less excited-sounding cackle,



Mahonia loved cars and trucks, often perching on them and trying to make friends with her own reflections in the window glass.

distinctly different from her fly-down utterance. I'm not sure how a hunter might make use of it, but it never hurts to be able to recognize and interpret the vocalizations of any game bird or animal.

Mahonia was always a great attraction for our guests at the ranch, most of whom were hunters. They'd never seen a nonchalant wild turkey before, especially one that loved cars, was aggressive toward dogs, and sought out human companionship.

She was with us for about nine months, and then one day she was gone, as suddenly and mysteriously as she had arrived. Mahonia had brightened our visits to the ranch more than we'd realized, and her absence created a perfectly turkey-shaped void in our enjoyment of the place.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.