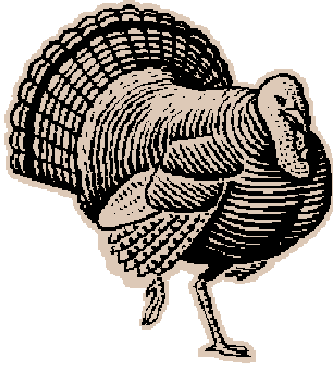


Birds in Our Oak Woodlands



Oak fanciers have long understood the importance of acorns as food for wildlife. But a closer look at the habits of some birds, particularly jays, shows that they do far more than harvest the acorn crop. An industrious group of jays can mount an acorn airlift that is nothing short of incredible, moving a forest worth of trees every autumn. Often the acorns are planted in the ideal spot for growing an oak seedling. Researchers discovered that 50 jays transported and cached 150,000 acorns in 28 days, about 110 acorns per day for each bird.

It's understandable that the smartest bird of the suburbs would develop the urge to whisk away acorns. The acorn crop is a short-lived bonanza, arriving just before winter food shortages. Persistence and speed in acorn storage mean more meals of high energy carbohydrates later. You can speculate on whether this behavior is learned or innate. Ornithologists believe that jays apparently know when they are under observation and scramble their behavior to confound research.

Unlike Acorn Woodpeckers which store acorns at centrally located granaries, jays scatter their storage sites over a large area. Soft damp soils provide numerous locations and a quick means of covering the cache, so jays inadvertently put acorns where they are most likely to grow. Researchers found that seeds planted by jays had a higher rate of germination than seeds selected at random under trees, suggesting that jays select the acorns which are most likely to grow into seedlings. They point out that the goal of caching acorns may be food storage, but it provides a valuable means of dispersing and planting oaks. Further, they suggest that the rapid dispersal of oaks after the ice age resulted from the northern transport of acorns by birds.

Acorn production costs oak trees a great deal; however, the return in acorn transportation and planting by birds probably balances the energy lost. It is often difficult to describe the interdependencies of wildlife and plants, but there can be no doubt about the reciprocal benefits enjoyed by oaks and jays. As we seek to restore and manage our oaks, it is important to remember the contribution of wildlife to the health and vigor of woodlands.

Autumn makes many people think of the holidays and family gatherings. Traditional feasts this time of year often center on domestic turkeys served in a grand fashion. The domestic bird, raised in large flocks, is quite different than its wild counterpart. Domestic turkeys have a reputation of being less than brilliant, docile, slow moving creatures. The wild bird is the complete opposite of the culinary breed. Keen eyesight, quick of wing and foot, agile, stately, regal are all adjectives that have been used by admirers to describe the bird that Ben Franklin once suggested as the national symbol. Once widespread and common, the wild turkey numbers plummeted in the late 19th century and was extirpated from much of its former range. However,

through the work of many conservationists, the bird can be viewed today as a sterling example of restorationists' efforts.

Introduced into California in 1877, the wild turkey has spread throughout many portions of the state. Turkeys prefer habitat that is a mix of large trees with grassy openings near water. Rugged, hilly terrain may have played a role in predator avoidance, in California, adding to their success. Their feeding habits are varied. Turkeys readily eat seeds, berries, leaves, mollusks, buds, acorns, pine nuts, and arthropods. A hen tending a brood will often bring her young to grassy opening during the summer to feed. The young are dependant on grasshoppers and other insects during the summer months for protein and these openings are relied upon for foraging.

Turkeys are still expanding their range in California since not all suitable habitat is considered occupied. They are capable of living near humans and many people actively attract turkeys by supplementing their diets with chicken scratch and other poultry feeds. The sight of a large tom strutting and calling during the spring courtship is spectacular sight that many people who are fortunate enough to have witnessed often recite and share.

Information contained in this article collected at UC DANR. Please contact the Farm Advisors Office at 754-6477 or <http://cecalaveras.ucdavis.edu> with your agricultural questions.