What do the turkeys do at night?

Jeff Fossett

It was nearly sunset when I found them, roaming in the grass by the Carpenter Center near Harvard Square, a flock of five turkeys — four males and one female.

I had, of course, serendipitously encountered the famous Cambridge turkeys many times. I'd turn around a corner and there they'd be, proceeding down the sidewalk as though on their way to work, or grazing in a bit of greenspace, or perched on fence and preening. I heard them in the mornings out my window sometimes, gobbling at each other, or confronting cars that sometimes honked back. But I'd never explicitly sought them out before.

Searching for a person in the urban environment comes with ready constraints. A person is unlikely to be standing in the middle of a road, or in someone else's yard, or perched on a tree branch. A person is more likely to be in certain places — a store, a park, a sidewalk, a personal home. Not so much for a turkey. A turkey could be anywhere.

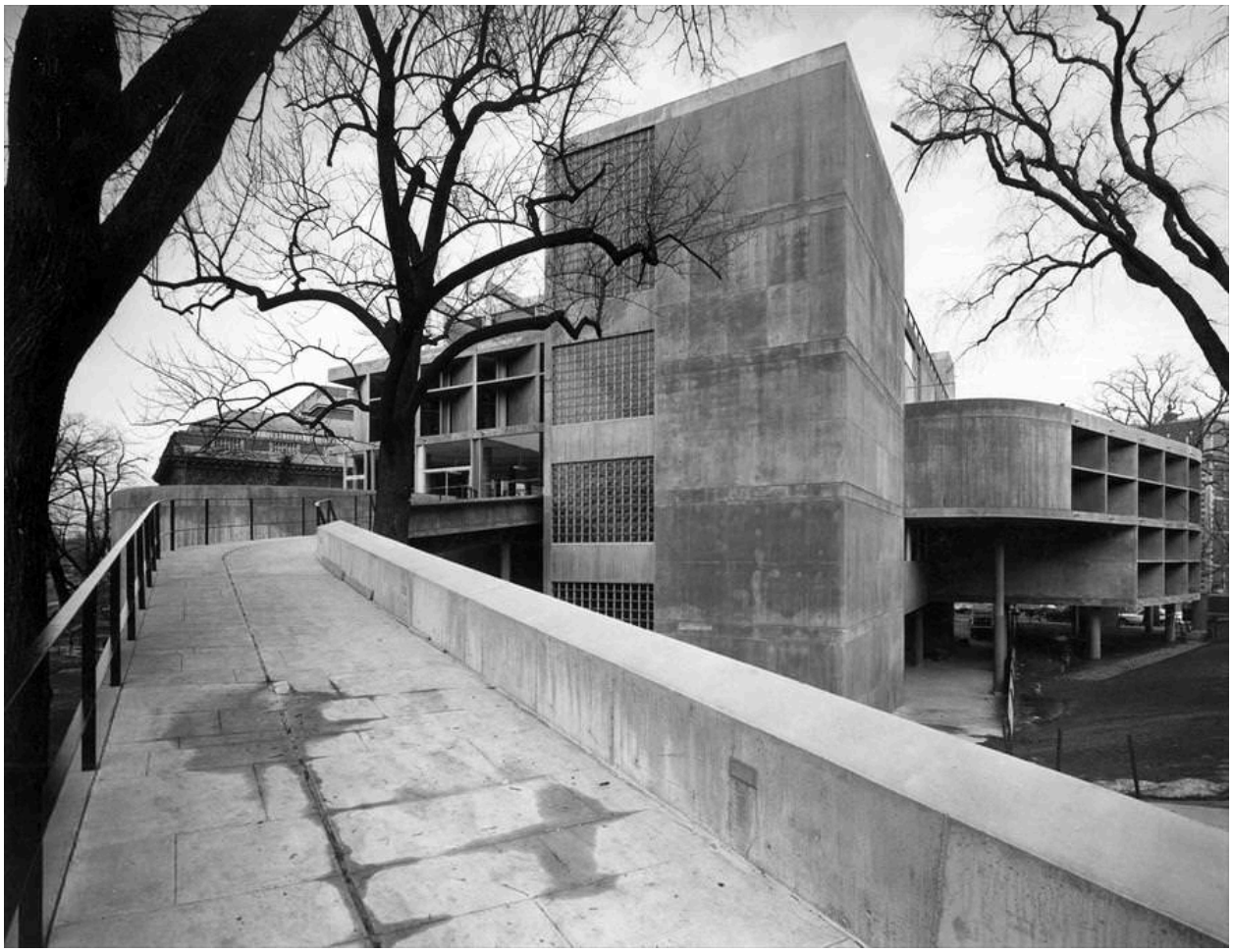
I'd set out on my bike in search around twilight with hopes of learning about the turkeys' nighttime routine. I rode around to spots I knew the turkeys frequented. I'd heard a few rumors, both from friends and online, about places they sometimes roosted in the night: the area around Avon Hill; the side streets near Oxford Street; amongst the Brattle Street mansions; near the Charles river. But there was no way to be sure of where they'd be on *this* night.

So it was a relief when I turned my bike up Quincy street and spied a first turkey in the grass not far from the road. It was just one I saw, but I knew others must be around too. I locked up my bike and went to investigate, discovering the other four alongside the first I'd seen.

I knew in principle that wild turkeys spent the night in trees. They had poor night vision, and roosting high in trees kept them safe from nighttime predators. Wild turkeys could fly, helping them reach their roosting spots — a fact I had read, but never seen for myself.

As dusk fell, I mused about whether the turkey flock was getting tired. What did it feel like for a turkey to be tired? How exactly did a turkey decide it was time for bed? I wondered and watched as one of the turkeys began walking its way up the large concrete ramp that defines the Carpenter Center's design.

I remembered that the Carpenter Center was something of a famous building, architecturally-speaking; it had been designed by influential (and controversial) designer Le Corbusier, a pioneer of "modern architecture". Its large, S-shape ramp was one of its most distinctive architectural features, curving up from Quincy street, through the center of the building, and then back down to Prescott street on the other side.



Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge. Source: Fondation Le Corbusier

I learned later that the ramp exemplifies Corbusier's concept of the "architectural promenade" — the idea that designers ought to pay attention not just to the static look of a space, but to the way that viewers would move through and experience it over time — the implied "itinerary" of a space.

I wondered if Corbusier had considered the evening itinerary of turkeys.

After proceeding about halfway up the ramp, the turkey declined the remainder of Corbusier's promenade, instead hopping up to one of the ramp's guardrails to examine a large red maple tree that stood nearby.

Standing on the rail, the turkey seemed to be considering the short flight to the tree. There appeared to be significant hesitation — or at least examination and planning — on the turkey's part. It would rock forward and then pull back, apparently negotiating with itself about making the flight. It reminded me a bit of a hesitant child working up the courage to jump off a diving platform for the first time.



Turkey on ramp at the Carpenter Center, considering, then making the flight into nearby Red Maple.

When the turkey's moment of commitment finally came, it seemed to yield something more akin to a wing-assisted jump than the kind of "flight" that I'd imagined — a hop and a furious flutter of wings carrying it just across the gap to the tree's nearest branch. Turkeys are large birds, and the flight seemed to require meaningful effort.

After regathering its wits, several subsequent flutter-jumps carried it from branch to branch, progressively higher in the tree until it found a suitable resting spot, perhaps some 40 feet off the ground below.

One by one, the remaining turkeys in the flock followed — each proceeding slowly up the ramp a ways, then flutter-jumping their way into the same nearby tree after some deliberate contemplation of the move.



Two turkeys consider the flight from ramp to roosting tree.

I was reminded of those dog stairs that people buy to help their small dogs get up into bed. For the turkeys, Corbusier's ramp served as something like this.

Once in the tree, each turkey claimed a sleeping spot in a distinct area. They all chose spots nearby, but none too close together. I thought of friends arriving to a rented vacation home, claiming the best bedrooms one by one before others arrived. I wondered what made a particular tree branch desirable as a sleeping spot.



Turkeys settling into their evening resting spots in a tree near the Carpenter Center.

After finding an acceptable spot, the turkeys settled in. They seemed to have a nighttime routine that involved plenty of preening — a maintenance behavior where the turkeys use their beak to clean and groom and align their feathers just so.

Eventually, I saw some turkeys begin to rest their heads; I thought I could see eyes beginning to close, but it was hard to be certain in the dark.

As the moon rose, I returned to my bike and headed home; I had my own evening preening to attend to.



Moon rises as turkey (right) rests in tree.

I woke early the next morning and made my way back to the Carpenter Center as the sun began to rise. When I arrived, the turkeys were all still in their resting places, but awake and seemingly preparing themselves for the day — preening again, and an occasional gobble of apparent communication. “Are you awake?” perhaps, or “Is it time to get up?” I could relate to lazing in bed for a while before conjuring the effort to start the day.



Turkey in tree in the morning, preparing for the day.

I'd returned in the morning to answer a simple question: how would the turkeys get down? Their final sleeping spots were quite high up in the tree. A single flutter-jump would not suffice to make it back to the ground. I settled at one of the Carpenter Center's tables, and waited.

As it turned out, the turkeys' journey back to the ground was considerably more elegant than their venture up.

The turkey that had been the first to bed was also the first to depart the tree. The move was again heavily telegraphed, prefaced by a good bit of wind up and inspection of the path to the ground.

But then, the turkey pushed off, wings swishing and gliding now, as it swooped its way past both ramp and lower branches (stepping stones no longer needed), at last landing nimbly on the street or grass below.

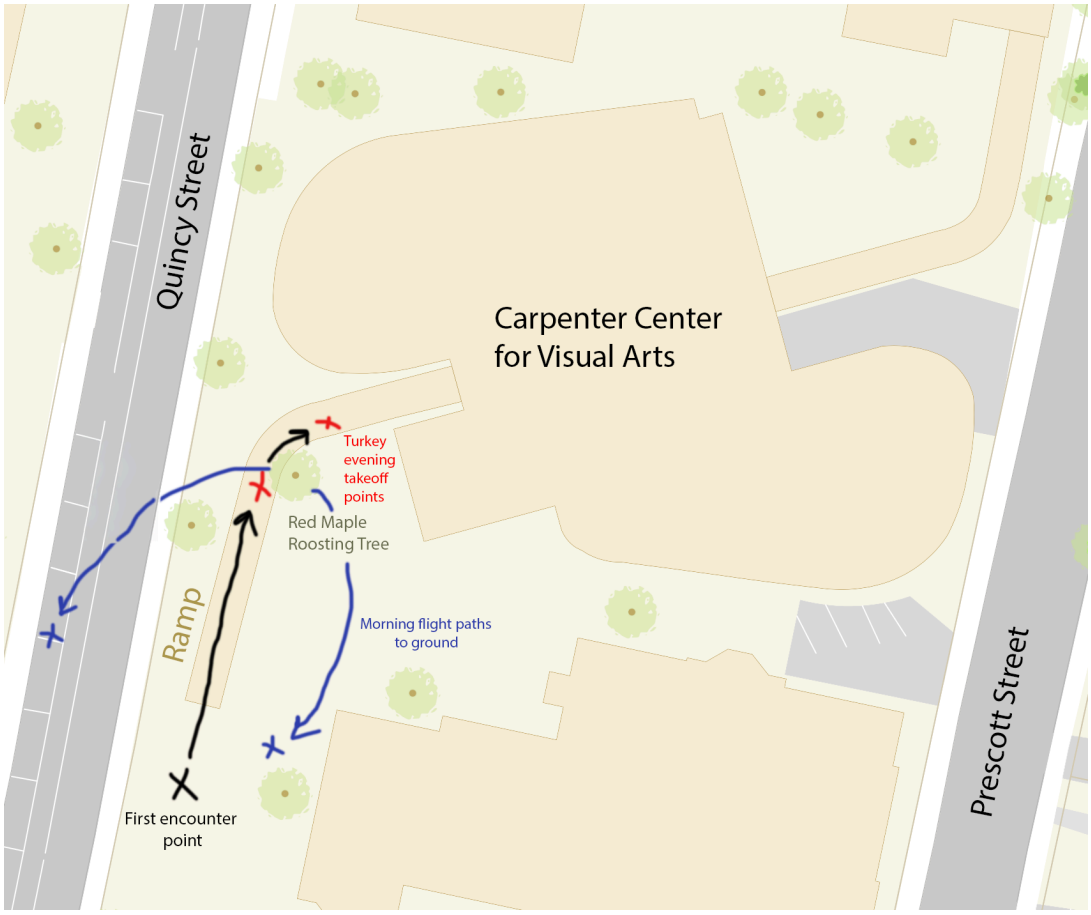


Chronophotograph constructed from video of turkey descending from tree.

The other turkeys followed one by one.

Once on the ground, wings were rapidly tucked away, and each turkey transformed from flighted bird back into the usual ambulatory form I recognized, ready to start its day.

When the whole flock had reached the ground, they grouped back up and made their way together towards Harvard Square. It was time to greet the morning commuters.



Annotated map of turkey night events. Map adapted from City of Cambridge Tree Activity Map (https://www.cambridgema.gov/services/urbanforestry/treeactivitymap)

Note to Q Review staff:

If the piece is accepted, I can make some improvements to some of the images — mainly the chronophotograph and the map. I'm thinking of the submitted versions as mock ups that could be cleaned up further. I also have a variety of alternative photographs if desired. Thank you for reading and considering the piece.