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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Steve: The Terribly Troubled Turkey

By David Frew
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Steve the Turkey approaching my car

My “military career” began with Cub Scouting, which involved dozens of interesting opportunities to earn merit awards. There were weekly Den meetings and monthly Pack meetings at which exciting adventure outings were announced. One of the most exciting expeditions involved traveling to Presque Isle during the

fall to hike one of the mysterious interior paths and see wildlife. I could not wait! Like most kids, I had been to the beach for picnics and swimming but never into the interior, where we were told that there were exciting animals to be seen. There was a preliminary meeting for the boys who had signed up at which we were instructed to bring bags of cut-up fruits or vegetables: apples were the commodity of choice. The bags of fruit were to be delivered to the leader's house the evening before the day of the expedition.

On the big day, we walked to St. Andrew School very early in the morning and were herded into several cars driven by scout volunteers. Eight or 10 kids to a car. No seatbelts, of course, but those were the days before seatbelts. Then we were all driven to the east end of Presque Isle. We gathered at the trailhead as the scout leader spoke to us in deadly serious tones. He explained how silence was to be the key to success that morning and we were taught to walk "Indian style," as in single file, silently lifting each foot carefully and placing it on a solid portion of the trail that we would be traversing so that there would be no crunching sounds. When he demonstrated high stepping, several of the boys snickered but we did not say anything. The leader explained that he had been "priming" a spot with food for weeks and that if we were very quiet, we could be almost guaranteed to see animals. Then he added that one of his friends had already been to the "secret spot" where we were all headed (silently) to spread the food that we had dropped off the night before.

Departure. Moving with great stealth, our group of kids followed the leader into the deep forest, stepping "Indian style" without talking to each other (quite a challenge of a bunch of 11- and 12- year-olds). After several arduous minutes, we came to a knoll where the leader signaled absolute silence by placing a finger in front of his lips. We dutifully followed him to the top of a hill where we all dropped to prone positions. And right there, before our amazed eyes, was a gathering of deer as well as other creatures. It was a scene from a Walt Disney film – animals grazing at the huge pile of cut-up food that one of the scout leaders had placed there a few hours earlier.



Bambi, Thumper, and Flower in the magical meadow – was that how forests actually worked?

Fast forward several years. I am taking a graduate course in “behavioral management,” during which we are learning about “conditioning.” Since Sea World has just opened a new show facility a few miles from our Ohio campus, the professor escorted us on a field trip to learn the “secret” ways that trainers were teaching killer whales and seals to perform the tricks that regularly delighted audiences. We were shown the “antecedents” that the Sea World trainers used to condition the animals to fetch balls, jump through hoops, and kiss spectators. We all understood that these behaviors are not ones that might be seen in a killer whale’s or seal’s native environment. They are taught using operant conditioning. When a trainer taps a foot, the animal knows that if he or she fetches a ball there will be a reward. A delicious fish. Hmm.

We now know that there were lots of problems with driving cub scouts, 10 per car, on field trips. And with spreading cut-up apples in the woods to attract white-tailed deer. Not to mention the infamous issues at Sea World! But we may be able to forgive some of those misdeeds, attributing them to a lack of understanding. That does not mean that well-intentioned people do not continue to make errors while intending to be helpful.

These days, there is a vivid example of conditioning at Presque Isle. “Steve the Turkey” is a current resident of Presque Isle State Park who has, sadly, become conditioned to connect the sound of automobiles as well as hearing his name. People feeding animals at Presque Isle is an ongoing problem and park officials have attempted to deal with this practice by placing signs near areas where feeding has traditionally taken place. There are a half dozen of these locations; places where people have regularly dropped-off “treats.”

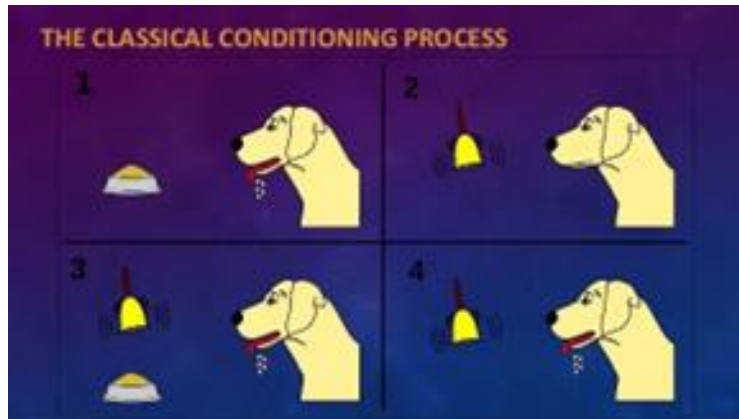


This “do not feed the wildlife sign” marks one of Presque Isle’s traditional feeding stations. Note the apples behind the sign.

During the last decade, wild turkeys have made a return to Presque Isle. They are commonly spotted along road edges, pecking away at the plants and roots that they regularly feed on. Most of the turkey that can be seen along the roads are in groups, and they have become used to automobile traffic. They seem oblivious to passing cars, but if an automobile comes too close (to look at them) or an occupant gets out, the turkeys quickly depart. Except for Steve. Somehow one male turkey, who is now a loner, has become a wildlife victim of human feeding. Park officials have named him “Steve,” and after dozens of reports from park visitors, they are monitoring his behavior.

Steve has become “conditioned” to automobiles because people have been feeding him from car windows. Steve will run toward any car that slows down near him and he has “learned” to wait at locations where automobile traffic is frequent. Steve “knows” that the best places are turnarounds and or parking areas where cars are likely to slow down or stop. Curious drivers slow down to get close-up looks or to take pictures, and several have clearly been feeding him. The conditioning chain is apparent. The sound of an automobile is the antecedent to Steve’s behavior, which is to approach the car. When he is fed the food is the positive reward. The effect of any operant system is to reinforce behaviors that are positive such as getting food. Thus, Steve has been conditioned to approach cars. Running toward cars is not a common behavior for wild turkeys.

Steve's conduct is a classic example of behavioral conditioning. It has worked exactly in the way that "Pavlov's" famous experimental bell caused dogs to salivate or Sea World trainers shaped Killer Whales toward fetching a ball. To illustrate the power of the conditioning process, Steve the Turkey has now been conditioned to respond to his name. It is not a natural for a wild turkey to respond to its name.



Steve has become a victim of Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning process.

What will become of Steve? Winter is coming and there will be fewer motorists at Presque Isle. This may put Steve at risk since he may have become overly dependent upon food handouts. What will Steve eat? Will he become more aggressive, approaching automobiles when they are still moving, and risk being hit. He has already been seen aggressively pecking at cars. Sometimes chasing cars down roadways. Ony time will tell.



Steve lurks about, waiting for unsuspecting cars.

There are powerful lessons here for us humans. Don't feed the animals. Become a cub scout.



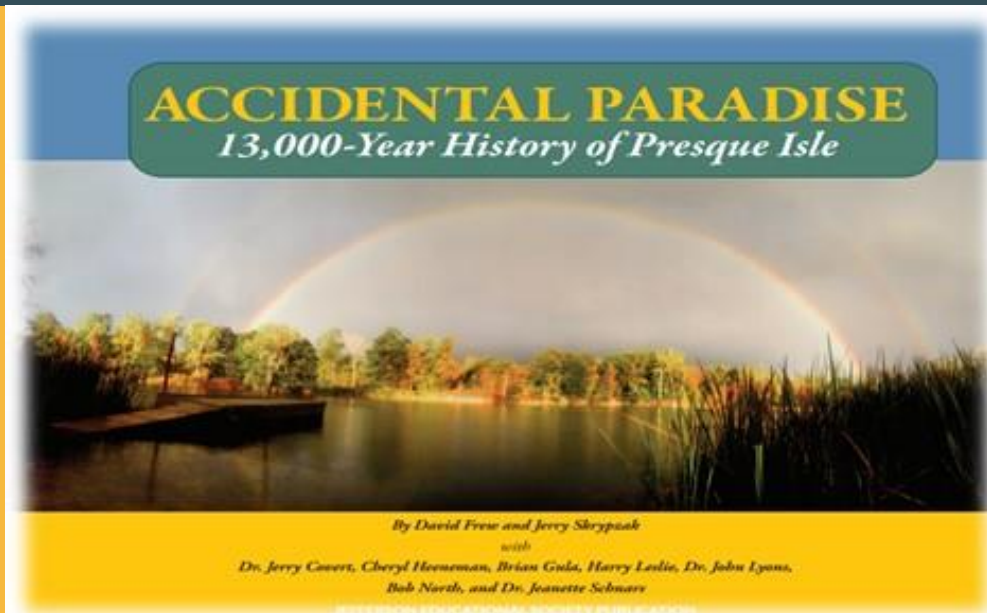
Typical turkey behavior at Presque Isle

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

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For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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