WE'RE OFF THE MENU:

I'm thankful for the selectivity of extinction. Those dinosaurs big enough to eat us are gone. Those we eat on Thanksgiving are still around.

In case you haven't heard, a Big Bird nicknamed Friggin made the New England news last week. It was an emu (Dromaius novaehollandiae) a fast, flightless, feathered phenomenon native to Australia that can reach a height of 7 feet in the wild and weigh up to a 100 pounds. One of these guys escaped from a farm in Simsbury in July, and has since been sneaking around the state, scrounging for food, dodging cars and providing a new form of wildlife entertainment.

After several unsuccessful attempts to recapture this fast, bipedal runner, it was finally cornered against a tall fence in Simsbury and recaptured. Its legs were tied to prevent injury. Then Friggin freaked out and died unexpectedly, presumably from a heart attack.

I have a different theory. I believe Friggin spent much of its life on the lam reading newspapers pulled from recycling bins. I believe it became deeply concerned about the gradual approach of Thanksgiving, when Americans go after big birds with a vengeance. I also believe he became anxious about America's tendency to super-size its meals.

Recall that Thanksgiving turkeys used to be the scrawny wild ones from the eastern woodlands, seldom more than a few pounds in weight. Today, super-store turkeys look like mutant butterballs, some reaching nearly 30 pounds. Putting two (our propensity for poultry) and two (our propensity to super-size meals) together, I believe that Friggin experienced a prophetic vision brought on by the hormone rush of being trapped and tied just before Thanksgiving. This vision, I believe, was that emus would soon be replacing turkeys as the main course of the holiday meal. Not wanting to inaugurate a new feasting tradition, I believe that Friggin simply willed its heart to stop beating, becoming a martyr for the cause of smaller portions, and for anything but emu on our plates.

We now return to nonfiction.

While thinking about Big Bird racing through the woods, I realized how thankful I was that the dinosaurs went extinct. Were this not the case, the top carnivores on earth would likely be a group of bird-like dinosaurs called Coelurosaurus, larger, more powerfully built and toothy versions of emus. This taxon includes both the Tyrannosaurs and the Velociraptors, of Hollywood fame. Like Friggin, all Coelurosaurus were probably feathered.

In fact, some were so morphologically similar to ratites (emus and ostriches) that they once bore the name Struthiomimids, meaning "ostrich mimics." This was later changed to Ornithomimids, meaning "bird mimics," which is practically the same thing. Like Friggin, they had small heads, pointed beaks, long necks held vertical, greatly reduced forelimbs, long legs built for speed and clawed toes. Like us, most were likely omnivorous.

So, when you pause to give thanks for the Big Bird centerpiece of your holiday meal, try to imagine a similar scene of gustatory anticipation from the late Cretaceous. Enormous emus with shaggy feathers and sharp teeth are standing in a circle, giving thanks for what they are about to eat. Their centerpiece is one of our fabulous fur-ball relatives, a placental mammal.

Dinosaurs became extinct 65 million years ago when an asteroid collided with Earth. But this is only because the taxonomic convention requires extinction as part of the definition. All birds - - from
grocery store turkeys to hummingbirds -- share a common ancestor with Tyrannosaurus rex, which, despite its gargantuan size, looks very much like a bird to a skilled anatomist.

More distant relatives of birds include other Coelurosaurs, more primitive Theropods, and one of the oldest dinosaurs of all, Eoraptor. Its ancient descendants once prowled the Jurassic shores of rift lakes in the Connecticut River Valley. Friggin, its modern descendant, prowled the same place before martyrdom.

I'm thankful for selective extinction. I get to eat the bird, rather than vice versa.