

A Rafter of Turkeys

GROUP ONE: TURKEY HISTORY

The birds we know as turkeys are native to Mexico and the eastern United States. They were first domesticated by the Aztecs in Mexico. Early European explorers called them “turkey” after the country in Asia that has that name. The explorers had not yet figured out that they were in the New World and not Asia. Since turkeys looked a little like the peacocks that other explorers had brought to Europe from Asia, they assumed that’s what they were. At that time anything from the exotic East was given the name “turkey.”

In the 16th Century, explorers took turkeys from Mexico back to Europe. There the species soon became established as a common farmstead fowl. Turkeys provided excellent meat and eggs and helped control pests by eating large numbers of insects. In the 17th Century, English colonists brought turkeys back to the New World, introducing European-bred types to the native turkeys in eastern North America. The result was the Standard Bronze, the turkey we often see pictured in Thanksgiving advertisements. It had brown features with buff-colored feathers on the tips of the wing and the tail.

1. Find the eastern United States, Mexico and Europe on a world map.
2. The Aztecs were the first to domesticate turkeys, what does this mean? Look up “domesticate” in a dictionary.
3. Where did the turkey get its name?
4. Why did turkeys become popular on farms in Europe after explorers took them back there?
5. How was the Standard Bronze breed of turkeys developed?



GROUP TWO: SUPERMARKET TURKEYS

The turkey we buy in the supermarket is from a breed with white feathers, called “White Breasted Tom.” Commercial producers prefer turkeys with white feathers because white feathers don’t leave pigment spots under the skin when they are plucked. The White Breasted Tom was the result of many years of selective breeding. Besides white feathers, the breed also has more breast meat and meatier thighs than early turkeys. Today the White Breasted Tom is the only turkey in large-scale production in the US.

Supermarket turkeys are usually raised indoors so they will be protected from airborne bacteria, viruses and diseases carried by migratory birds. Inside, the flock is also protected from predators. The turkeys are fed a diet of corn and soybean meal mixed with a supplement of vitamins and minerals.

1. What does the word “commercial” mean in the second sentence?
2. Why do commercial producers prefer turkeys with white feathers?
3. Why would commercial producers prefer turkeys with more breast meat and meatier thighs?
4. Look up the phrase “selective breeding” in an encyclopedia. What characteristics were developed in the White Breasted Tom through many years of selective breeding?
5. Why are supermarket turkeys raised indoors?
6. What do supermarket turkeys eat?



A Rafter of Turkeys

GROUP THREE: WILD Turkeys

Turkeys are considered to be a bird because of their feathers. There are two types of turkeys; common turkeys raised for food by farmers and wild turkeys that live in hardwood forests and grassy areas. In nature, wild turkeys live together in groups call flocks. There are nearly 7 million wild turkeys in North America and all states have populations that are huntable except for Alaska. Turkeys that are raised by farmers for meat production are normally larger and weigh more than turkeys living in the wild. Due to the weight difference wild turkeys are able to fly for short distances at speeds up to 55 miles per hour for about a quarter of a mile; however the common turkey are too heavy to fly. The wild turkeys diet consist of fruits, insects, and seeds. They are known as omnivores - organisms that eat both plants and animals.

1. What does the habitat of a wild turkey consist of?
2. How are common turkeys and wild turkeys different?
3. What do wild turkeys eat?
4. What is an omnivore?
5. What is one thing a wild turkey can do that a common turkey can not do?



GROUP FOUR: HERITAGE TURKEYS

A heritage turkey is a variety of domestic turkey raised to help conserve historic characteristics that have been bred out of the turkeys we normally find in the supermarket. Some of those characteristics include the variety of feather color, their smaller size and their growth rate. Heritage turkeys are raised in a manner that more closely matches the way turkeys live in the wild. In the wild turkeys roam free and eat grass, seeds and large numbers of insects. Heritage turkeys are fed grains, like commercial turkeys, but they are also put on pasture to eat grass and insects. They have longer lifespans and slower growth rates than commercially-grown turkeys. While White Breasted Toms grow to an average of 20 pounds in four months, heritage birds take seven months to reach their market weight of 18 pounds.

1. Name some historic characteristics of heritage turkeys that are different from supermarket turkeys.
2. How are heritage turkeys raised?
3. How is the diet of heritage turkeys different from the diet of wild turkeys? How is it similar?
4. How are the lifespans of heritage turkeys different from the lifespans of White Breasted Toms?

