

GENERAL SCIENCE

Thanks for the Turkey

Now comes the traditional feast of Thanksgiving, with the golden brown turkey surrounded by potatoes, corn, apples and other shining fruits harvested from our bountiful country.

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See Front Cover

► THE FAT TURKEY on your Thanksgiving table has a strange ancestral history of travel from the wild woods of Central America across the Atlantic Ocean, through Europe and Africa to Turkey, and back again across the ocean to North America.

The saga of the wandering bird began about three centuries ago, when Spanish conquistadores discovered Mexico and South America and plundered the golden treasures of the Aztec Indians. They also stole some of the savory semicultivated birds they found among the royal possessions of King Montezuma.

According to chronicles, the Spanish navigator Francesco Fernandez took these birds across the ocean on his return home to Spain in 1519. From Spain, the turkey, named *Meleagris*, spread through the trade routes of central Europe.

Since the Mohammedans at that time held the southern coast of the Mediterranean, the tasty birds were quickly brought to the two great centers of Moslem life—Mecca and Constantinople. From here, chronicles relate that the birds spread through parts of the Turkish empire, backtracked through the lower Danube valley, across northern Greece, and into Austria and Germany.

They arrived in England about 1530, and by the end of the 16th century they were common in Scotland.

New Varieties Developed

As the turkeys moved throughout Europe, new and different varieties developed, and they looked different from the way they looked upon arrival in Spain. The Black turkey became quite common in Spain, France and parts of England, probably developed by continual selection of the darkest turkeys for breeding. In England it was called the Norfolk Black.

The White turkey was developed in Holland, and this breed then spread to France, Austria and Hungary. Mingling of the Black and White produced the Gray turkey of England, Ireland and Italy. When the Gray was bred to the Black, the Blue or Slate-colored turkey was produced.

The name "turkey" became affixed during the bird's circuitous route through the Middle East. Curiously enough, when the turkey first reached northern Europe, it was credited to a land even farther east than Turkey—India. The great natural historian of the 16th century, Konrad Gesner, called the bird "Indian" or "Calcutta," or even "foreign" fowl.

Relics of this Indian naming still survive

in some modern European languages. The turkey is called *gallo d' india* in Italian, *dindon* in French and *Indianer* in Viennese German.

During the American colonization period, in the 17th century, the birds were packed up and sailed across the Atlantic Ocean again. In the New World, they were mated with native wild turkeys, forming foundation stocks from which our present turkey varieties have developed. As the early American settlers moved west, so did the turkeys, and today the domesticated birds are grown extensively throughout the United States. The well-fed gobblers seen on this week's front cover are part of the expanding population of turkeys grown to supply traditional Thanksgiving feasts.

At the present time, turkey raising is a huge commercial production. This year farmers are expected to produce about 103 million turkeys—four percent more than last year, according to the Department of Agriculture. This prosperous crop is more numerous than that of previous years, but down from the 1961 record of 108 million.

Minnesota leads the turkey production this year with an estimated 16 million turkeys, edging ahead of California, which has dropped from first place with its production



USDA

BRIGHT-EYED TURKEY—Ancestors of this startled bird made a long journey from 16th century Mexico to Spain, through Africa to Turkey, where the name was acquired. Then they traveled back through Europe, across the ocean again to the New World and finally to your Thanksgiving table.

of 15 million. Other top producers include, in order of production, Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin, Virginia, Texas, North Carolina, Arkansas and Ohio.

For the past ten years, the Beltsville small white turkeys, which are "midgets" weighing about seven pounds with much white meat, have been extremely popular with the American people. Present plans of growers are to produce heavier birds in order to supply the growing demand of restaurants and food-processing plants. Many turkeys now weigh 50 or 70 pounds, and some even weigh 100 pounds.

Stupid Birds

Turkey raising is not so simple as it may seem to be and is often frustrating, since domesticated gobblers can be incredibly stupid and scatterbrained. For one thing, the birds have to be taught to eat, some growers report; otherwise, they literally starve to death with food standing in front of them. Some pompous turkeys have even become self-hypnotized by bobbing their heads back and forth as they drink water and have drowned themselves.

A sudden loud sound or a fluttering piece of paper blown by the wind can cause such panic in a turkey yard that the birds stampede themselves to death against the fence.

The well-fed selectively bred birds cannot even do what comes naturally to produce their own offspring. If left to their own vague devices, turkey flocks would produce eggs, 85% to 90% of which would be sterile. So turkey growers have used artificial insemination to boost conception rates to about 70% or 75%.

Wild Turkey Remains Alert

The North American wild turkey, however, still remains alert and wary, with bright eyes and sharp hearing. Weighing about 10 or 12 pounds at maturity, these wild cousins are some of our largest game birds. Once roaming the fields and forests of America in large numbers, they were then hunted so thoroughly that at one time they were in danger of becoming extinct.

Today many states are beginning to protect them with hunting laws and to restock them in certain areas, and the birds are on the increase. Most of the wild species are found today in the southern or southeastern United States, with the largest estimated populations existing in Texas, about 250,000, Alabama with 86,000, and Florida with 80,000.

The sleek indigenous wild turkey once came close to being chosen as our national bird. When the design for the Great Seal of the United States was being discussed, influential Benjamin Franklin urged using the wild turkey. He vigorously objected to the bald eagle, because it is a "bird of bad moral character" that does not get its living honestly but rather by stealing fish from other birds.

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