


TREMENDOUS TURKEYS

By: Andrea Spencer



Here on a mountain side in North Wales the sound of turkeys gobbling along with the bleating of mountain sheep is often heard. These turkeys are not destined for the oven but are my much loved pets. We live on a North Wales smallholding and along with my hundred or so rare breed chickens I also keep nine turkeys.

My interest started after seeing an advert for "Bronze poults" (the name for young turkeys) in my local paper, I decided to go and have a look more out of curiosity than anything else. The birds I saw were magnificent



wandering around the owner's farmyard, the stags were displaying to the hens and they really were wonderful to watch whirling and twirling. I was smitten and after choosing a big one and a little one (hopefully a stag and a hen) I set off with my pair of 3 week old turkeys. The owner of these birds gave me 2 turkey eggs as a gift and low and behold 4 weeks later I had another two poults once again a big one and a little one.

So now what? To be honest although I love the principle of rearing ones own food it is really difficult to dispatch (kill) something you have reared from a tiny chick, especially when done on such a small scale. I am sure if I had 100 of them it would not be the case but in this case the birds were destined to be pets.

Very young buff turkey poult

I now had 2 pairs of Bronze turkeys they lived in my large chicken shed roosting at night with the chickens.



Turkeys need space and a much larger shed to live in than chickens; they will also roost at night at the top of the tallest tree if they do not have their wings clipped rather than go in their sheds. They take up much more room on the perch of my shed and can be quite unkind to the smaller birds that may push in on the perch between them. I have heard terrible tales of vicious stags attacking their owners but my hand reared birds are friendly and tame.



Bronze turkey hen



Buff turkey hen

Here in the UK we have a good choice of which turkeys to keep ranging from the White to the Buff, Bronze, Norfolk Black and Pied to name a few. Although not common they are reasonable easy to source and if you join the Turkey Club UK it certainly is easier to obtain good pure bred stock. <http://www.turkeyclub.org.uk/index.htm>

Turkey club UK is a wonderful club they issue a newsletter 4 times a year and set the breed standards and not only will they supply names of breeders should you join their ranks but also have a super website that has a bulletin board should you have a problem you wish help with. Fortunately there is usually someone out there that has had the same problem with their turkeys and will offer advice online.

Getting back to my own stock, I now have nine turkeys, five buff and four bronze, this number has fluctuated over the past 3 years as we have new additions and sell them on etc. The two breeds are kept separately to ensure any offspring will stay pure.



The birds lay incredibly well and here we are in mid August as write this and I am still getting 3 eggs most days from my 3 buff hens. I believe the average is approx 85 eggs a season, although I have done much better this year. The hens started to lay their eggs in April and are

still going strong 4 months later.

The birds lay their eggs in a large wooden box that is in a nice quiet area of the garden, although will often make their own nests away from the flock and I have found up to 15 eggs hidden away in undergrowth. The eggs are sold to other breeders for hatching or they can be used for baking - they make the most wonderful sponge cakes.

Basil, gorgeous boy!

The birds I keep are "unimproved" this means that they have not been specially bred to grow quickly and have huge amounts of breast meat. My birds are leaner and longer than the square looking improved birds, they grow slower and I have been told taste better although this is purely personal taste so to speak.



As the stags are now reaching 40lb in weight the hens are protected from the stag's amorous advances by wearing leather saddles that sit on their backs. These measure 21.5 cm by 24 cm and have a stiff leather ring standing proud to give the stag something to grip on. There have 2 loops that slip over the wings and this holds the saddle in place. I have seen terrible tear marks on the backs of unprotected hens so this is really necessary should you wish the sexes to live together. Here in Wales I have a wonderful saddler who makes the leather saddles for the turkeys at a reasonable cost. (Available mail order from Jones saddlers - 01691 652822)



Turkeyhen with saddle

Left: the saddle close-up

Under: saddle underside

I have been very fortunate with my birds and they have had no major illnesses although Blackhead (histomoniasis) can be a problem for any turkey keeper (blackhead has nothing to do with the head going black but is a protozoan infection that will kill often within a few hours of you first spotting something is wrong. Symptoms are the birds



looking listless, uninterested in life or food losing weight and the tell tale sign bright yellow diarrhoea. With the withdrawal of the regular traditional medication that cures this awful disease turkey keepers are having trouble controlling it. An alternative drug is available from veterinary surgeries but on the large scale producers are having real problems.

It seems regular worming is good prevention for blackhead, good husbandry is a must and as with all my birds they are picked up weekly checked for any parasites or injury etc. The sheds are cleaned out weekly sprinkled with a powder bird friendly disinfectant and clean woodshavings are put down on the shed floor.

I often have people calling in buying chickens and eggs and the majority of people who visit here usually make awful noises of repugnance when they see my turkeys.



Although after a short time of watching these beautiful stags displaying to their females these same people become interested in the birds and are often asking if I have any turkeys or hatching eggs for sale.

I really enjoy keeping my turkeys and would recommend to anyone who feels they have the adequate space and conditions to have a go.

www.rarebreedchickens.co.uk

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*Roosters and chickens are so varied and so funny.
Drawing them is a delight.
If you would like to have some fun,
just take a look at my website.*



<http://users.skynet.be/imagexpression>