

THE TRUTH ABOUT TURKEYS

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Pity poor tom turkey.

We call him ugly. We call him stupid. And then, come Thanksgiving, we eat him.

Fortunately, there are some people out there who appreciate him for who he is, who even think he's beautiful. People like Jeff Wright.

"They're an amazing bird," the Grand Rapids man said. "The wild turkey has got so many colors in it, it's just absolutely breathtaking. ... Their head looks a little ugly but when you look at the total package, I'm just in awe of them."

As a hunter and president of the Maumee Valley Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, Mr. Wright appreciates other qualities of the turkey too. For example, they have keen eyesight and surprising speed — wild turkeys can run 25 miles per hour and fly short distances at up to 55 miles per hour. (Domesticated turkeys bred to have more breast meat, on the other hand, aren't able to fly, and they're generally white to avoid any discoloration of the meat.)

Turkeys have managed to make a few friends in high places over the years. A live turkey has been presented to the White House for more than 60 years and the president has offered formal pardons since George Bush did it in 1989.

Long before that, Benjamin Franklin wrote how he thought the beast, a native of this continent, would be a good choice as a national symbol.

"For my own part I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen as the Representative of our Country... in Truth the Turkey is in Comparison a much more respectable Bird, and withal a true original Native of America," he wrote in 1784.

In a nation known for its innovation and can-do spirit, the turkey has proven especially resilient. Its population in the United States was down to fewer than 30,000 as late as the Great Depression due to over hunting and the destruction of habitat, but conservation efforts now have those numbers at close to 7 million.

For many Americans, though, the question of a gobbler's worth really comes down to a simple matter of taste.

"I like to look at them as food," said Sherrie Rosenblatt, a spokesman for the National Turkey Federation, an advocate for the turkey industry that is based in Washington.

It's not known for certain whether the bird was served at the first Thanksgiving in 1621, but it's become a staple at most people's modern holiday gatherings, as depicted so



BLADE GRAPHIC

FUN FACTS ABOUT TURKEYS

Turkeys have some unusual anatomical characteristics with equally unusual names.

Caruncles: red-pink fleshy growths on the head and upper neck of the turkey.

Snood: a long, red, fleshy protuberance that hangs over the beak and can be extended or contracted at will. The function of this and caruncles are unknown but probably developed as ways to attract mates.

Wattle: a bright-red appendage at the neck.

Beard: a cluster of long, black hair-like feathers found on the chest of the male turkey. They can average nine inches long on adults.

TURKEY FACTS

- Nearly 88 percent of Americans eat turkey at Thanksgiving.
- The average weight of birds purchased for the holiday is 15 pounds.
- Last year, about 46 million turkeys were consumed for Thanksgiving.

famously by Norman Rockwell in the painting “Freedom from Want.” Ms. Rosenblatt said it’s easy to see why.

“It feeds a lot of people so it’s very good for a feast,” she said.

It provides a lot of options too — turkey pastrami, turkey sausage, turkey bacon ... you get the idea.

If you want a local turkey for your Thanksgiving Day table, you may have to plan ahead. CJ Natural Meats near Defiance raised about 80 grass-fed turkeys this year and closed sales of them by mid-October.

“Call us ... at least by September to get on the turkey list [next year],” said Renae Schlatter, store manager.

That should provide at least a little consolation for the turkey. It may not always be fully appreciated, but at least it’s in demand.

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- Overall, the average American ate 17.5 pounds of turkey in 2007.
- More than 271 million turkeys were raised in the U.S. last year and the same is expected for 2008.

TURKEY TRIVIA

- Male turkeys are called toms. Females are hens and a baby is called a poult. A large group is called a flock.
- Only tom turkeys gobble. Females make a clicking noise.
- The turkey is one of only two domesticated birds originating in the Americas. the Muscovy duck is the other.
- When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin ate their first meal on the moon, their food packets included roasted turkey and all the trimmings.