



A tom turkey, showing off his long beard and spurs. (Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

Thanksgiving Turkey

Background on Thanksgiving’s most popular dish: Turkey

My earliest memories of Thanksgiving go all the way back to when I was living with my grandparents. Every year, my grandmother would have the entire family of aunts and uncles over for dinner.

She would cook the largest turkey that she could find, together with all the trimmings. She was a Polish lady and had many old family recipes for dumplings, cakes, breads and many other side dishes.

The arrangement was simple. She would cook way too much food, and I would do my best to eat myself into a coma. Remember, this was during a time before they invented cholesterol and heart disease. We ate butter, food fried in lard and lettuce went on our hamburgers. We also ate beef at just about every evening meal.

The centerpiece of just about all Thanksgiving meals is the big turkey, but it was not always the case. Contrary to popular belief, Thanksgiving did not become a traditional celebration because of the Massachusetts Pilgrims, and the turkey was not the center of the famous 1621 meal. The turkey did not make its way onto the Thanksgiving platter until



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

around the early 1800s. It is often thought that Benjamin Franklin pushed for the wild turkey to be the symbol representing the states on the National Seal, but that was just a myth.

The original “seal committee” formed in 1776, and was composed of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. The committee could not reach an agreement for a symbol, but the turkey was not one of the options.

It was not until 1782, when the third “seal committee” finally reached and agreement naming the bald eagle, another native to North America, as the official seal. Franklin eventually grew tired of the variety of bald eagle motifs used by various groups as the seal. Some of the representations were pretty sorry looking.

One of the badges called the Order of Cincinnati apparently looked more like a turkey than that of an eagle. Franklin always admired the turkey and thought the bird was more respectable than the eagle, but he never officially recommended the eagle as the seal. He made comments that the badge looked like a turkey, and not an eagle. Perhaps that is where the confusion came into play.

Each Thanksgiving, Americans consume 46 million turkeys. Fortunately, these are domestic and not the wild turkeys we have running around in our woods. Farm raised birds have a much higher fat content, and in comparison to the wild bird, are quite tender.

Wild turkeys number around seven million in the United States. But it was not always that way. In the 1930s, the population was down to less than 30,000, because of poaching and habitat destruction and uncontrolled hunting.

There are five subspecies in the U.S that include the Merriam, Rio Grande, Osceola and the Eastern. If you head south, you can find the Gould’s turkey, which lives in northwest-

ern Mexico and parts of extreme southern New Mexico and Arizona.

The ocellated turkey is a different species entirely, living in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and in several adjacent countries. This bird looks more like a peafowl than like it’s northern cousins. Males have a bronze-green iridescence, long spurs, but no beard.

Colorado is home to two subspecies of the turkey. One is the Rio Grande, which was introduced to our state in 1980. The Rio Grande lives mostly on the eastern side of Colorado, preferring river bottoms lined with cottonwood trees. The Rio Grande birds are often found in the farming areas of the plains.

According to estimates from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the turkey is thriving here. The current population estimates exceeds 35,000 birds, and they are present in 53 out of 64 counties across the state.

The native turkey to Colorado is the one that lives in the Montrose area and is called the Merriam’s or Mountain Turkey. This bird lives primarily west of Interstate 25, preferring the mountainous regions. The Merriam likes open meadows and parks, oak brush

and piñon junipers.

The noticeable difference between the two species might be the amount of white on the tips of the tail feathers. Merriam’s have some white on the very tips while the Rio Grande usually has a golden or brown tip.

A turkey has no sense of smell, like many other wild animals do, so they rely on very good hearing and eyesight to survive. The best way to describe their eyesight is “incredible.” It has been said that a turkey can see an arm movement at 300 yards, and from my own experience, I can attest to that. Turkeys, when I’m hunting, have busted me more than all other game animals combined. Turkeys have no night vision, which is why they stay on a roost during the nighttime hours.

These birds are capable of flying up to 50 miles per hour for short distances, and can run at 25 mph to escape a predator. When you spot a turkey in the wild, rest assure he has already seen you. It is amazing to me just how fast they can vanish from sight.

I don’t think that many of our Colorado wild turkey is destined to be on a Thanksgiving table. They

are pretty crafty and overly cautious, making them an unlikely centerpiece for the big meal. That’s all right with me because the grocery store usually has plenty of farm-raised birds that are much easier to obtain than the wild ones.

I miss the spread my late grandmother used to put out for us. Apparently nobody ever told her that some of the food she prepared might be considered unhealthy, and I doubt she would have cared. She made it to 93, so maybe that says something about all this “healthy eating.”

My wife creates a fantastic spread, and as always, I will overeat, and take a long nap on the couch. I hope all of you enjoy your Thanksgiving feast next week.

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