

Turkey 101



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Thanksgiving is one of the few days I am allowed to eat all I want without getting “the look” from my wife. She cooks up an incredible feast, with enough left over to feed a hungry battalion of foot soldiers for a month. I do my best to eat as much as possible, to the verge of a food coma, then nap on the sofa until the pumpkin pie desert comes out. That usually holds me over until supper when a plate full of leftovers is in order.

The turkey that graces our festive tables over the holiday season is a domestic version. Akin to the “boneless chickens” raised on the farm of Col. Sanders, the domestic bird doesn’t bring much to the evolution table like his cousin, the wild bird, does.

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. Americans do love their turkey at Thanksgiving.

My grandmother made a wild turkey at Thanksgiving, back in my childhood. This assumes, of course, that we got one. The family friend, Mr. Caster, usually showed up with a bird for her a couple days before Thanksgiving. There was no hunting season open then, but with Mr. Caster, nobody dared to ask.

The wild turkey was not the succulent, juicy, and tender bird that most of us harvest at the grocery store. The wild bird lives a life of constant danger, being so low on the food chain and scores of natural predators. They require a different method of cooking, and if not properly prepared, they are as tough as Pat Boone’s shoe soles.

Most folks know the basics about our wild turkeys, but they are a unique animal, with many surprising and oddball trivia. Take turkey droppings for instance. You can tell the sex and age of a turkey by studying its droppings. Male droppings are j shaped while female droppings are spiral shaped. The larger in diameter the dropping is, the older the bird.

Early Europeans are the folks who came up with the name “turkey.” They named it after the country Turkey because it reminded them of the helmeted guineafowl, a ground dwelling bird from Africa.

The feast the Pilgrims held back in 1621 had a much different menu, which did not include a turkey. English colonist Edward Winslow wrote about four men heading



I assure you the turkey on your Thanksgiving table is much more flavorful and tender than these wild birds. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

out for a day of hunting and returning with many fowl for the feast. Around 90 Wampanoag people were in attendance and brought five deer to the table. There was probably more seafood than anything else, as clams, eel, seaweed and fish were a staple back then. Reportedly, the celebration went on for three days.

Wild turkey is very difficult to hunt. It is doubtful that a pilgrim could have got within a quarter miles of a turkey, and with their crude weapons, the turkey probably outgunned the hunter. Since there weren’t any Butterballs around at the grocery store, the newcomers ate seaweed and fish.

Of the six subspecies that make North and Central America home, the Osceola, Gould’s, Oscillated, Merriam’s, Rio Grande, and the Eastern, all have different color feathers, especially in the tails when fanned. The tail

feathers have deep spiritual meaning to Native Americans, and they are often used in artwork. The average adult turkey wears between 5,000 and 6,000 feathers.

Anyone who has encountered turkeys in the wild knows they can run fairly fast. When alerted, they can reach 25 mph. They are also pretty good at flight too, reaching an airspeed of 55 mph. What you probably didn’t know is they are pretty fair swimmers and don’t need a lifejacket to do it. Turkeys spread their tails, tuck in their wings, and start kicking.

Some of you might have enough gray matter on their topknots to remember the mood rings of the 60’s and 70’s. Women wore the mood ring, and the stone would change color with her mood change. Green meant average, calm, blue meant charged and active, gray was for strained or anxious, violet meant pas-

sionate, and black meant run for cover.

A wild turkey’s head is similar to a mood ring. The bald head can change color in seconds with excitement or emotion. Blue and white are the normal, alert yet not anxious colors, while red and pink indicate passionate, angry, or alarmed. They don’t have a black color, so men are safe there.

Like just about every other animals in the kingdom, there are several proper descriptive nouns for a group of turkeys, and flock isn’t one of them. A group can be called a crop, dole, gang, raffle, or my personal favorite, a posse.

Mexico was the first country to begin the domestication of the wild turkey, raising them for their eggs and as a meat source. From there, the domestic birds were exported to Europe. It was a fair amount of time before American’s began importing them and later

raising them for our own production.

It is said that the first presidential pardon ever given was by Harry Truman in 1947 and it was given to a turkey. It spurred an annual tradition of allowing two turkeys (one for the President and one for the Vice President) to be spared each Thanksgiving. In looking into where these spared birds end up, it turns out that some have been taken to Frying Pan Farm Park in northern Virginia and more recently they have gone to Washington’s Mount Vernon. The domesticated birds are not in terrific health, so the spared birds usually die of natural causes in a year or so.

The Butterball at our house will not get a pardon. He will be greatly consumed at the main meal, and his remains sentenced to turkey soup and turkey sandwiches. And I won’t get the look for eating too much.

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Plants on your holiday table are a great topic for conversation



Gardening From A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

I’m certain you’re going to have a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving. But just in case things start going awry and grandpa begins telling you about his latest ailments, again, and the topic of politics is just about to break out, I have a way you might steer the conversation in a fun direction. Why not talk about some interesting facts about the food being served at your holiday

feast? Here’s some great plant talk information that I’m sure people are dying to hear.

When it comes to cranberries, you probably don’t want to let the kids know that they’re a powerhouse of all things good for you. You might want to go straight to the fact that they’re native to the U.S. and were used extensively by Native Americans for food and medicine. And they probably really were served at the first Thanksgiving feasts. Cranberries were also used in ceremonies and as a natural dye and even juice. The kids at your table may have no idea where cranberries come from or how they grow. They may not know that according to the USDA, Wisconsin is the leading producer of cranberries in the U.S. They produce about 5.3 million barrels of cranberries a

year. A barrel of those little suckers weighs about 100 pounds. Hold a cranberry in your hand and think about how much it weighs. That would take a lot of cranberries! Massachusetts produces about 2 million barrels; New Jersey and Oregon produce about 500,000 each. Washington, Michigan, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Rhode Island are also serious contenders. In fact, the U.S. leads the world in cranberry production

If you grew up on the Western Slope, you may have never seen Cranberries growing or know about the bushes. These low-growing, cold-hardy, evergreen shrubs or groundcovers are native to swamps and bogs of North America. We have a cotoneaster cranberry that grows here but they’re not the same and you wouldn’t want to eat their



The food on your Thanksgiving table can become a great topic for conversation. (Photo/Linda Corwine McIntosh)

fruit. Cranberries are often harvested by flooding the fields because the ripe fruit will float to the top. That’s why the guys in the cranberry commercial are standing in hip waders in a bog. I think that would be a fun experience.

You might include marshmallows somewhere in your Thanksgiving feast so you can talk about them. I wonder if the kids at your table know anything more about them than they taste good and they want “some more”.

That’s actually how the campfire treat S’mores got the name. But it may surprise everyone to learn that even the ancient Egyptians enjoyed marshmallows. This was

See HOLIDAY page B3

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