

# Turkeys



## History

Turkeys are the only fowl that originated in the Americas. When the Spanish Conquistadors landed in Mexico in 1519 they discovered that turkeys were already domesticated (Crawford, 1990). Archeological information indicates that the turkey was domesticated around 200 BC in the Tehuacan area of Mexico. The Spanish, on their return home, introduced them to Europe.

In about 1625 the turkey was reintroduced to Eastern North America from England by the Pilgrims. They bred with the indigenous turkey of that area to produce the bronze coloured bird that became the foundation of the modern turkey (Crawford, 1990).

The wild turkey was, at that time, found all over the North American continent and had been given the name of *M.g. silvestris* meaning that it was a bird of the forest and open glade. This name still applies to the wild turkeys that have been successfully reintroduced into Eastern Canada in recent times.



## A Day in the life of a Turkey Producer

Early in the morning a turkey farmer goes to the barn to check on their birds. There are many technologies in a turkey barn that helps the farmer with their daily chores.

There are automatic feeders and waterers that the turkeys have constant access to. The farmer checks that these are working properly. The water must be clean and be the correct pH for the turkeys, as it has a big effect on their health.

The temperature and humidity are controlled by computers in the barn. The farmers check to make sure the ideal temperatures are provided. Poults (young turkeys, typically less than 4 weeks old) require a warmer temperature (25-32 C) than grown birds (18-24 C).

Before going into the barn, the farmer puts on clean, barn-specific boots. They check to see that their birds are happy and healthy, and remove any birds that may have become sick. They come back to the barn at least one more time later in the day to check on their birds. They also have electronic security systems in place in the barn so if anything goes wrong (e.g. lighting, humidity, feed lines, water lines, temperature) they get a notification on their cell phones and can address the problem day or night.

## Production

Each producer decides on the size of birds that will be raised on their farm. Many start with a large flock of female poults (young turkeys) and grow them to two sizes. The first flock is raised for 10-12 weeks when the birds weigh less than six kilograms. These birds are sold as broilers. Once the first flock is removed, the barns have more space, and the second flock can be grown to a larger size. These hens (the word for female birds) will grow for a total of 13-15 weeks and will weigh approximately 6-10 kilograms.

# Turkeys



Some producers will choose to grow just broilers or hens, but not both. The third category of production is the Tom turkey. Toms are male birds, grown for 10-18 weeks. These birds weigh more than 10 kilograms.

Producers purchase poults from a hatchery. The hatchery has very strict rules of cleanliness, called bio-security. This ensures that no diseases are passed on to new born turkeys. On the first day after the hatch, they are delivered to the turkey farm to be raised by a producer. Usually, several thousand poults are delivered on the same day.

## Diet

All turkeys are led healthy diets of Saskatchewan grown grains, plus minerals, and vitamins. Young turkeys are called poults. Poults are led a diet that is specifically formulated for young birds, called starter feed. As they grow, their dietary needs change and feed is often adjusted to match growth stages of the bird. Poults are fed a "starter" mixture. As they grow, the feed is changed to meet nutritional requirements. Each type of feed includes the proper balance of protein, energy, fibre, fat, and other elements such as calcium, phosphorous, magnesium, and vitamins.

Turkeys are fed nutritionally balanced diets of mixed grains and oilseeds, which may include corn, soya, wheat, barley and canola, for optimal health and development. There may be a very small percentage of animal by-products included in the feed.

Turkeys have access to feed 24 hours a day, which means they can help themselves to food or water at any time.

In Canada, turkeys are NOT given hormones or steroids! These have been illegal for over 30 years. It is scientific advancements such as selective breeding, better feed formulation and modern management practices that are responsible for the larger, healthier turkeys produced today.

## Animal Welfare

Consumers have demanded birds are cared for in the most humane way possible and the producers of this province share their concerns.

Turkeys are raised year-round in large barns. Turkey barns allow birds to be grown free range in a clean protected environment where their nutritional and developmental needs are met. Living in a barn helps to prevent stress on the birds.

Turkey barns are designed to provide birds with ample room to move about with easy access to water and feed. Natural and/or artificial light is provided, and most barns are insulated to help maintain a constant temperature.

The barn protects turkeys from our extreme Canadian weather (heat, rain, cold, snow, wind). With ample and controllable ventilation, the farmer can provide his/her turkeys with cooling or warmth as required.

Barns protect turkeys from predators such as weasels or foxes. The barn also protects the turkeys from diseases and viruses transmitted by wild birds, rodents, flies and other animals.

# Turkeys



The barns are cleaned and sanitized before laying down fresh litter for each new flock of poults. Proper cleaning prevents infections and the spread of disease from one flock to another.

These modern barns allow turkey farmers to meet the demand for fresh turkey products all year round.

## Turkeys and the Environment

Turkey farmers depend on healthy soil, air and water for the livelihood of their families. They do their best to take care of the land to have a healthy place to live and raise their turkeys.

Turkey Farmers of Saskatchewan works together with Turkey Farmers of Canada to assist farmers in running a sustainable farm. Guidance and training are provided to ensure the birds are healthy, waste is reduced, and resources are used more efficiently.

Used bedding and other barn waste, which is rich in nitrogen from bird droppings, is composted and reapplied to fields as fertilizer.

## Nutrition

Turkey meat is an excellent choice any time of year. At Christmas and holidays, or large family gatherings, whole turkeys are often stuffed and

roasted. For smaller meals any time of the year, turkey parts or ground turkey is cooked into our favorite recipes such as tacos and stir-fries.

Turkey white (breast) meat contains only 3 grams of fat and 135 calories per 90 gram serving, while dark (thigh) meat and ground contains only 6 grams of fat and 168 calories. The meat is rich in protein and many vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin B6, vitamin B12, niacin, selenium and zinc. This makes turkey meat a favourite among athletes. Not only is turkey a good healthy food choice, but we all know it's delicious too!

### Careers

- Farmer
- Veterinarians
- Scientist
- Nutritionist
- Breeders
- Food Processing
- Retail

### Glossary

- HEN: female turkey
- TOM: male turkey
- POULT: baby turkey

## Industry in Saskatchewan

Production: 5,400,000 kg (2017)

Number of Producers: 11 (2017)

Value to Economy: \$13,500,000 in farm cash receipts (2017)

## Industry in Canada

Production: 165,000,000 kg (2019)

Number of Producers: 523 (2019)

Value to Economy: \$382,600,000 in farm cash receipts (2019)