

Turkey Factsheet

Social Structures:

Wild turkeys are native to North America, whereas domesticated turkeys are believed to descend from the South Mexican turkey. Wild turkeys tend to live in forests where they spend much of their time foraging for food such as plants, seeds, worms and insects. Turkeys prefer to nest on the ground in dead leaves at the bases of trees or under thick shrubbery, or occasionally in hay fields. The wild female turkey lays one clutch of eggs per year and can have a clutch size of between 4-17 eggs (laying one egg per day) with an incubation period of 25-31 days. The chicks leave the nest within around 24 hours and travel in a family group with their mother, often combining with other family groups to form large flocks of young turkeys accompanied by two or more adult females. Each sex has an independent pecking order with a stable female hierarchy and a constantly changing male hierarchy. Turkeys in the wild can live up to 15 years old.

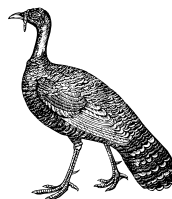
Natural Behaviours:

Young turkeys in particular spend a lot of time flying short distances and performing spontaneous frolicking which is a form of play. As the birds mature this behaviour calms down but adults still enjoy short bursts of flight, dust bathing and roosting. Turkeys are extremely social and become distressed when they become isolated. Adults have the ability to identify strangers and may attack if they do not accept the newcomer. Turkeys are highly vocal and the sound of the flock can be an indicator of any social tensions. For example, a high-pitched trill can indicate that the turkey is feeling aggravated and can lead to intense sparring between individuals where opponents may leap at each other with talons extended and peck at each other's heads. Aggression between individuals tends to increase with maturity. Soft, slow trills are an indication of a content individual. Males spend a significant amount of time sexually displaying to females. Displaying involves fanning the large tail feathers, puffing up the body feathers to appear larger in size, and the skin of the head becoming flushed with a bright blue or red colour. The snood is a fleshy piece of skin found just above the beak of the individual. It is an important tool for communication.

Goodhearted Turkey Care:

At the sanctuary we are home to two rescued turkeys: a male stag and a female hen called Colin and Susan. Rescued in 2018, Colin and Susan were destined to be someone's Christmas dinner.

Thankfully this was not the case and they now have the opportunity to live out their lives as naturally as possible. The pair have formed a close bond and Colin spends all of his time following Susan around the sanctuary garden as she forages for food. Our turkeys are kept in secure overnight



Colin is a Bourbon Red turkey who was rescued in 2018. Male turkeys, known as stags, will puff up their feathers to display to females and warn away any potential threats.



housing to protect them from opportunistic foxes but have free range of the sanctuary yard and gardens during the day. Our turkeys are regularly health checked and given routine treatment to prevent lice or worms. They have plenty of natural opportunities to run, fly and perch wherever they wish and can often be seen dustbathing with our rescued hens. In their overnight enclosure we have placed a mirror as a form of enrichment for the turkeys - both of them quite enjoy looking at themselves and strutting their stuff in front of it! Our turkeys are fed a mixture of layers pellets and corn twice a day and have constant access to fresh water and natural foraging opportunities.

Turkeys in UK Agriculture:

It is estimated that around 16 million turkeys are killed annually in the UK, most of which are reared in indoor production systems. In December alone, it is estimated that 1-2 million turkeys are killed during the festive season in the UK.

Indoor farming systems deprive the turkeys of being able to act out almost all of their natural behaviours. They suffer immensely during their short lives due to the poor welfare conditions found in these systems as well as the implications associated with years of intensive selective breeding, which we will look at in more detail below.

Indoor Farming systems:

In a typical UK indoor rearing system, there could be up to 25,000 individuals kept in one shed alone. The sheds are notoriously crowded with only 3.5 square foot of space for each bird. As the turkeys grow larger, this space becomes even more restricted with some birds losing the ability to change position at all due to overcrowding. Moreover, temperatures may soar due to restricted ventilation and lack of natural air streams. Sadly, thousands of turkeys die every year in this situation due to heat exhaustion. The sheds are never cleaned during the entire lifespan of the turkey, so they will be surrounded by contaminated litter which releases ammonia which in turn can

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Turkeys in UK Agriculture:

lead to sores and blisters developing on the turkey's skin as well as an increased risk of respiratory disease. Contaminated litter may also lead to an outbreak of disease such as avian influenza, Salmonella or E. coli which would lead to large flocks of turkeys being culled as a precautionary measure.

Conditions within the barns are poor, with little or no opportunities for the turkeys to display their natural behaviours. This leads to stress in the birds which can lead to the turkeys becoming bored and frustrated. This behaviour can manifest itself as aggression towards other turkeys, with sparring a frequent occurrence between individuals as well as injurious pecking and even cannibalism in some cases. To prevent this, the tip of the turkeys' beak is removed using an infrared laser just after hatching. The overcrowded sheds have no natural light, instead artificial lighting is used which is strictly controlled to encourage the turkeys to eat more food, reduce their activity and grow fast. The turkeys are kept in very low light to reduce feather pecking, but this can cause eye abnormalities and blindness.

The turkeys are then caught, transported to an abattoir and slaughtered at just 4-5 months of age. There is no turkey-specific legislation protecting turkeys in the EU.

Higher Welfare Indoor Systems:

This system, despite being nearly identical to a standard intensive system, is classed as higher welfare due to a slightly larger allowance for space per bird as well as the presence of perching opportunities often in the form of bales of straw.

Free range systems:

These systems allow turkeys to have daytime access to an outside range for at least half of their lives. The turkeys are allocated slightly more space which allows them to sufficiently exercise, leading to stronger, healthier legs. These systems often use slower-growing breeds so the turkeys are less likely to suffer from congenital problems such as heart failure or lameness. Having access to daylight and fresh air also means a reduced risk of eye infections or respiratory disease.

Organic systems:

Turkeys in these systems are given more space per bird and are kept at much lower stocking densities than indoor or standard free range systems with EU law dictating a maximum stocking density of 2,500 birds - 10x smaller than an intensive farming system. Slow growing breeds are used, resulting in a slightly longer lifespan of around 5 months of age.



Our turkeys have free range of the sanctuary with plenty of space to roam around as well as opportunities to fly and perch wherever they deem fit - in this case, on the wheel of our tractor! This photo also shows just how large adult turkeys can grow to be.



Global farming of turkeys:

Across the world, the United States is responsible for breeding, rearing and slaughtering the most turkeys each year. In 2019, approximately 230 million turkeys were killed in the United States. Of these, around 46 million are slaughtered to celebrate Thanksgiving alone.

Welfare concerns for turkeys:

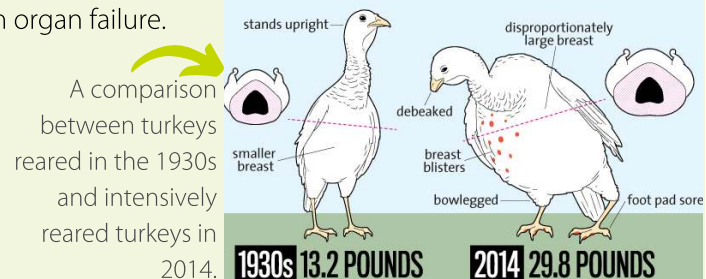
Animal welfare is based on three main components (below) and when these become compromised, that can have a direct impact on the quality of that animal's life.

- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Natural living

Turkeys in intensive farming systems are most at risk of developing the following problems, but even birds in higher welfare systems continue to suffer due to their unnaturally large size.

Artificial selection in turkeys:

Turkeys are now nearly double the size that they were in the 1960s due to artificial breeding - selecting genes for the largest birds who grow very quickly so that more meat can be produced in a shorter timeframe. This means that modern day turkeys are now too large to reproduce sexually, and instead artificial insemination is used in every single instance. The turkey's large size also leads to physical discomfort for the entirety of the bird's life, such as keel sores, joint problems and even organ failure.



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Welfare concerns for turkeys:

Turkeys reared in standard systems are often not given enough space or facilities to carry out all their natural behaviours properly, such as foraging or perching, or moving around freely. Other welfare problems that can be associated with insufficient space include: foot pad lesions (caused by the birds standing or sitting on litter which may have high levels of ammonia from a build up of faeces) and heat stress.

Other key welfare issues have been highlighted below.



Overcrowded sheds of up to 25,000 individuals with little ventilation and no natural light.



Injurious pecking between individuals is common as a result of little or no environmental stimulation.



Individual birds are de-beaked within days of hatching using an infrared laser.



The transportation process is incredibly stressful and involves the capture and crating of birds into very tightly packed cages.



Foot pad dermatitis is common as a result of the high ammonia levels found in indoor rearing systems.



Dustbathing is an important natural behaviour which all turkeys enjoy doing to protect their feathers from unwanted lice and mites. They will find a peaceful secluded spot with plenty of dry substrate to scratch out their own shallow pit. They then ruffle their feathers and roll in the substrate.

What can you do to help?

If you are concerned by anything that you have read in this factsheet, you may be wondering what you can do to help.

At Goodheart we believe in the power that individual consumers have to make positive change for animals. The only way that you can be sure that you are not contributing to the exploitation of turkeys is by cutting out all turkey products from your diet. This way, you can be sure that you are not condoning the cruelty involved in the production of these products. Even if you are unable to cut these products out of your lifestyle entirely, taking steps to reduce your consumption and choosing higher welfare systems wherever possible will also help to lower the demand for intensively reared turkeys where the risk of animal suffering is highest.

You may also wish to read more about the following scheme which aims to increase the welfare standards for turkeys in particular:

- RSPCA: [RSPCA Assured Scheme](#)
- Animal Welfare InterGroup: [Introduce minimum welfare standards for turkeys across the EU](#)



Check out our sources:



- [1] <https://select-statistics.co.uk/blog/will-it-be-turkey-this-christmas/>
- [2] <https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/factory-farming/turkeys/hidden-lives-turkeys/>
- [3] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/>
- [4] <https://deanfarmtrust.org.uk/get-the-facts/our-information-sheets/>
- [5] <https://www.peta.org.uk/blog/15-tweetable-facts-about-turkeys>
- [6] https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wild_Turkey/lifehistory
- [7] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/928469/poultry-statsnotice-22oct20.pdf
- [8] <https://www.animalwelfareintergroup.eu/news/standardsforturkeys-join-movement>