

Christmas Turkey



We raised and sold fifty turkeys this year. We harvested all but this one in time for Thanksgiving. Our turkeys are raised in protected “free range.” They are free to range in the daytime but like all our poultry, they are locked in a safe pen at night. It is a jungle out there after dark.

This particular turkey is a Broad Breasted Bronze. He is obviously a Tom Turkey. He is “displaying” in hope of attracting a female. Not much chance of that unfortunately.

The turkey is healthy but he has many broken and damaged feathers. I will explain that below.

We also raised Broad Breasted White turkeys. The two varieties, Bronze and White, are essentially identical. They are simply color variations of the same breed.

White birds are preferred by commercial growers. That is because white feathered birds of all types are easier to dress for sale. Not because the feathers are any different but because tiny white feathers that may be missed in plucking are less likely to be noticed by the cook, than tiny colored feathers. In a factory setting, more white birds can be processed per hour. That is true for all commercial poultry. Cornish Whites are the most popular meat chickens. White Pekins are the most popular ducks. White Embdens are the most popular goose.

We also sold a dozen Red Bourbon turkeys that our friend Mary raised. Red Bourbons are a heritage breed. They are beautiful birds but they grow much slower and smaller than the broad breasted turkeys. Virtually all turkeys sold in the US are Broad Breasted Whites, raised in confinement.

This fall we processed turkeys in September, October, and November. Each time I selected the biggest birds. The ones that were 20 pounds or more. I did that to keep the maximum weight under 25 pounds. Turkeys, like most other animals, grow at significantly different rates when allowed to range. It is not just poultry; hogs and cattle also grow at much different rates when given life choices. The growth rate differences are affected by physical traits, energy level, appetite, and personality. In confinement, those differences are suppressed.

The turkey in the photo was attacked by a coyote in daylight. Daylight coyote attacks are uncommon. The evidence, (lots of loose feathers) indicated that the turkey flock had drifted into the woods. A coyote stalked the flock and attacked this turkey. The turkey made it back to the farmyard where the coyote gave up the fight. Coyotes will hunt through the farmyard at night but are very reluctant to do so in daylight. There are good reasons for that.

Unfortunately, the turkey was severely injured. It was not even capable of standing.

The attack took place in early November, the day before I was scheduled to haul the last turkeys to the processor.

This bird was not going to make it.

I intended to euthanize it and composted the carcass.

Gail often has other ideas, however. She decided to put the turkey in the hen house and nurse it. At first, she had to put food and water next to the bird because it could not move. The turkey ate and drank but it did not walk for weeks. Not until it miraculously stood and walked on Thanksgiving Day.

It is now a Christmas turkey. I suppose that is a promotion of some sort. Best regards. Tom