

WILD TURKEYS

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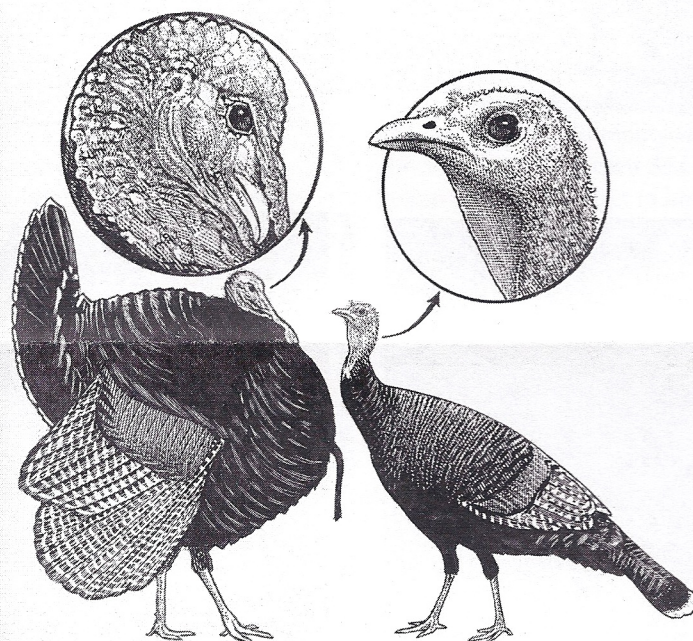
A survey conducted a few years ago in England revealed that 40% of young adults polled were unaware that milk came from cows. The friend who alerted me to this shocking finding mused in a similar vein: Do adults or kids know where the avocado hails from, or that avocados grow on trees? Lack of awareness about the origins of our food and the wild relatives from which those edibles descended is widespread. How many milk-drinkers know that the wild hooved creature that gave rise to Bessie the cow is descended from the mighty Eurasian aurochs, its forest-living ancestor now extinct in the wild? Or that the cultivated avocado tree is a direct descendant of the wild *Persea americana*, a tree species native to southern Mexico?

These musings led me to wonder: do today's children, cut off from nature or an appreciation of wild things, believe that the only kinds of turkeys in the world are those fattened on farms to end up at the local supermarket around Thanksgiving? The turkey grown on farms for consumption during the holidays is but one of 11 species (out of the more than 10,000 bird species) that have been successfully domesticated for human consumption. These species include those familiar to all, such as the chicken (descended from the Red Jungle fowl of South Asia), the duck (descended from the Muscovy duck), and the goose (descended from the Graylag and Swan goose).

The turkey found in supermarket freezers, however, was not domesticated from Ben Franklin's favorite bird during the colonial period but much earlier and south of the

border. Our domesticated version hails from a subspecies native to southern Mexico and, in honor of the mealtime preparation of its ancestors, we should serve it with a sprinkle of coriander or in mole sauce rather than gravy. The remains of turkeys identified at archaeological sites in southern Mexico and Guatemala date back to AD 200. By the mid-16th century the Spaniards brought this tamed subspecies back to Europe. It spread to France and Britain and became a farmyard animal and a delicacy for the rich. The Pilgrims who came to the shores

The wild hens rarely exceed 12 pounds and average nine pounds, so they are smaller than the Safeway "subspecies" fattened for the holiday table. It is not only their size that makes the wild male and female look so different, but their coloration and plumage. The tom is defined by his large, featherless reddish head, offset by a red throat and ornamented with red wattles on the throat and neck. When males are excited (as when in the presence of females), the fleshy flap on their bill expands. This tissue, along with the bare skin of the head and neck, fills with blood, and is a visual flare.



Wild Turkeys. (Illustration by Trudy Nicholson)

of Plymouth in 1620 likely brought turkeys with them, totally unaware that the forests of Massachusetts teemed with the wild close relative of the barnyard variety. As is often the case with the wild relative of domesticated species, the southern Mexico ancestral variant is now highly endangered in the wild.

The modern industrial farmyard turkey, even with its head still attached, is an injustice to the splendor of the wild bird. Like most members of the pheasant family, of which the Wild Turkey is the largest, there is pronounced sexual dimorphism: a male, or tom, as he is called, can weigh up to 24 pounds, and averages about 17 pounds.

Why write about Wild Turkeys this month in a Cabin John column? The reason: the birds are, or will soon be, residents here. Wild Turkeys were spotted this year in Great Falls Park during the first week of April. And in years past, I have seen them riding my bike on the Capital Crescent Trail just below Georgetown. Wild Turkeys once ranged widely across the eastern U.S. and Canada, but due to habitat loss and overhunting, they were reduced to fewer than 30,000 wild birds by the 1930s. A ban on hunting and an intensive breed-and-release program brought them back to where they are now once again common. Because turkeys are omnivorous, they can easily colonize new areas and adapt to the

local fare. Nuts, berries, seeds, roots, insects, and even frogs, lizards, and snakes go down the gullet. Wild Turkeys do not have a homing instinct. So if you reintroduce them somewhere, they will stay put, unlike geese that will try to fly home.

When you hear the captivating sound of male turkeys and watch them display, it is the essence of wild nature—North American style—and a sound and sight to remember. I am waiting for the first report in *The Village News* of a Wild Turkey at a Cabin John backyard bird feeder, pecking at seeds spilled on the ground. Let's keep our eyes open and hope to wake up to the gobbling. **VN**