

Turkey Care

Turkeys are an often misunderstood and maligned creature, but anyone who has spent a little time with one knows how affectionate and wonderful they can be. In the proper setting, keeping pet turkeys can be a delightful and rewarding experience.

Basics

The average lifespan of a turkey ranges broadly depending on genetics and life history. Heritage or “fancy” breeds generally live between five and 12 years, while those bred commercially for meat typically only live three to five years. Size and body weight also vary depending on breed. Heritage breeds weigh in between 10 and 18 pounds, while commercial breeds can grow up to 30 pounds or more!



Martha (left), an adult broad-breasted white turkey raised for meat, weighs more than twice as much as Thelma (right), an adult lilac turkey – a heritage breed.

Behavior

Turkeys are social birds and do best in groups. That being said, there are potential challenges to consider before adding birds to your flock. Turkeys can be territorial, and may fight over access to resources. Male turkeys (toms) can be particularly aggressive with each other, especially during the mating season, so it is best to wait until late fall or winter before introducing birds (cooler weather also helps to prevent additional stress). It is important to allow turkeys to work out dominance issues, but be available to break up fights if necessary

(e.g. if one bird won't back down after a few minutes, if there is bloodshed or other injury, etc.).

Another challenge to housing turkeys depends on breed. Commercially bred male and female turkeys may not be able to live together safely. Because birds bred for meat grow so large, males can inflict serious injuries to females during mating attempts. In the meat industry, reproduction is achieved via artificial insemination, but natural mating attempts can result in open skin wounds, ligament and joint damage, broken bones, or even death of female birds.

Space

Most sources recommend at least five square feet of coop and run space per bird (larger breeds require more space). This may be adequate if your turkeys will be free-ranging during the day (i.e. have access to a backyard, pasture, or other open space to roam), but if they will be confined to a coop and run, you should provide a minimum of 12 square feet of space per bird. That being said, the more space your turkeys have, the happier they'll be! Provide each female with an appropriately sized nesting box. Heritage breeds and younger commercial breeds will also need space to roost; for heavier birds or those that cannot perch, a bale of straw makes a good place to sleep.

Turkey coops can be purchased pre-made, constructed from kits, or custom built. No matter which way you go, there are several things to take into consideration. Your chicken coop and run should be absolutely safe from predators. If housed improperly, turkeys can be easy prey for raccoons, coyotes, and your household pets! Closures on doors and windows should be predator proof, and wire mesh should extend 12" down and 12" out from the bottom of the run to exclude burrowing predators. Coops should be relatively draft-free, but have proper ventilation to help maintain respiratory health. When choosing, designing, or building your coop, make sure it's easily accessible for cleaning – a clean coop means happy, healthy turkeys!

If your turkeys will be free-ranging during the day, make sure you have appropriate fencing to contain them. Since most commercial breeds are too heavy to fly, fencing that is four to five feet high is adequate, but heritage turkeys can fly easily and high! Regular wing trims are an effective and painless solution, but keep in mind that while you are preventing them from escaping your yard, you are also preventing them from escaping potential predators! Therefore, use strong fencing and bury wire mesh to deter digging predators.

Diet

Commercial turkey or gamebird diets are readily available, but most are formulated for rapid growth; "maintenance" formulas (containing about 12% protein) are better, but you may need to special order them through your local feed store. Use a feed that is free of antibiotics and hormones (i.e. non-medicated). Some heritage turkeys can be free-fed, but commercial breeds are prone to compulsive overeating so feed should be restricted to ¼-¾ cup twice

daily per bird. Fresh greens, such as finely chopped kale or romaine lettuce, make a good addition to your turkey's diet and will help them feel satiated without adding excessive calories, especially if they are receiving only a small amount of commercial feed. Because they have no teeth, turkeys also require access to grit, which helps them break down and properly digest food. Grit can be purchased at your local feed store, or if your turkeys are free-range, they'll pick up small stones and pieces of gravel to do the job! Clean, fresh water should always be accessible. Make sure you have enough feed and water stations that all turkeys in the flock (especially more subordinate individuals) have access.

Health care and maintenance

Turkeys rarely show obvious signs of illness, and by the time they do, it's often too late. Therefore, it's important to perform regular health checks on your flock so you can differentiate between what's normal and what's abnormal for your birds. Weighing your birds can also be helpful to track trends in weight gain or loss. When handling your birds, watch for signs of stress including open-mouth breathing or struggling to get free; if your turkey appears stressed, release them and try again later. At Charlie's Acres we weigh and check our turkeys once a month, and do keel and foot checks on our heavier birds every two weeks. Here's what we look for:

Eyes	Discharge (may indicate respiratory infection), swelling (may indicate eye infection)
Ears	Debris
Nostrils	Debris, discharge (may indicate respiratory infection)
Mouth	Gurgly/raspy breathing (indicates respiratory infection), sores, sour smell (indicates sour/impacted crop)
Keel	Thinness, wounds
Body	Feather quality, parasites, wounds
Abdomen	Fluid, thickening, tumors
Wings	Breaks, bruising
Vent	Discharge (may indicate vent gleet/yeast infection), prolapse, smell, sores
Legs	Heat, raised scales (indicates mites), swelling, breaks; trim spurs if necessary
Feet	Heat, swelling, sores (indicates bumblefoot), wounds; trim nails if necessary

Common ailments

Avian health problems can be difficult to diagnose and treat, so it's important to find a turkey-savvy veterinarian to help determine the best course of action. Below are a few things to watch for in your flock.

Part of a turkey's digestive system is known as the crop. This is where food is stored during the initial stages of digestion. Crop stasis (also crop impaction and sour crop) occurs when

the crop is blocked or otherwise not functioning properly. Watch your turkeys' chests – a crop in stasis will be distended and may feel hard or full of liquid, like a water balloon. If the crop is not emptying, your turkey is not receiving nutrition, and needs to be seen by a vet as soon as possible to both remove the obstruction and determine its cause; the cause can be as dangerous as the obstruction itself.

Walking on hard, rough, or splintery surfaces can result in small wounds on the bottoms of your turkeys' feet. These wounds may become infected and form pus-filled abscesses. Consult your local avian vet for treatment, which will vary depending on the severity of the bumblefoot – whether or not the wound is infected, and if so, the type of bacteria causing the infection.

Turkeys, especially heavier breeds, are at risk for joint problems including arthritis, as well as contact and pressure wounds on the keel, legs, and feet. It's important to check these areas frequently as sores can quickly turn into open wounds that become infected. Help prevent pressure sores by providing thick bedding for your turkeys to rest. If scabs or sores do appear, consult a vet immediately to determine the best course of treatment. Older, heavier birds are particularly at risk for arthritis. Joint pain and swelling can be managed with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs prescribed by your veterinarian.



Martha's feet (left) in comparison to Thelma's (right) – Martha is an older, much heavier bird whose swollen leg and foot joints are evidence of arthritis.

In warm weather, turkeys are prone to heat stress. The best way to prevent heat stress is to provide your flock with plenty of cool, shaded areas to rest; fans and misters can also help. Make sure all turkeys have access to clean, fresh water, and that their coop is well-ventilated. Signs of heat stress include open-mouth breathing, drooping combs or heads, and collapse. If you notice any of these, work quickly but handle your turkey gently to avoid further stress.

Move the bird to a shaded area and direct a fan toward it on a low setting. Mist the turkey lightly with cool water, focusing on the comb, wattles, legs, and under the wings; do *not* dunk your bird or pour cold water on it, as this could send it into shock. Continue to monitor your turkey until its behavior returns to normal. Consult your vet to ensure that your turkey recovers fully.

Check your turkeys regularly for lice and mites. Lice can be difficult to see, but you may observe clusters of lice eggs at the base of your turkeys' feathers. You can help prevent lice infestations by making sure your turkeys have access to clean, dry areas in which to dust bathe. Lice infestations can also be treated topically with medicated liquids or powders; consult your avian vet for the best course of treatment. Mite infestations are treated similarly, but can be much harder to eradicate, as mites are able to live for weeks without a host. Therefore, mite infestations require that your turkeys' living area be treated as well.

Turkeys naturally molt their feathers once a year, usually in spring or fall. During this time, your turkeys could lose a lot of their feathers and might look pretty raggedy. Molting typically takes one to three months, and is an energetically costly process, so it's not uncommon for birds to act sick or otherwise "off".

In addition to monthly health checks, we recommend that you have fecal samples from your flock analyzed at least twice a year to check for the presence of internal parasites. Signs of parasitic infestations may include increased feed consumption, weight loss, poor feather condition, lethargy, mouth gaping or gasping for breath, and diarrhea or dark or bloody stool. If fecal analyses reveal internal parasites within your flock, your vet can help you determine the correct medication and course of treatment.