

FARMER'S DIARY

TALKIN' TURKEY

STORY AND PHOTO BY MARIA BUTEUX READE

I work at a farm that raises turkeys and people often wonder why our pasture-raised birds cost more than conventional birds that come with a pop-up thingy in their belly. This piece may shed some light.

The terms “free range” or “pasture raised” conjure images of turkeys enjoying an idyllic, independent life on verdant fields. Idyllic, true. Independent? More like assisted living, with a caretaker checking daily to make sure the residents are healthy, fed and protected.

All pastured animals need tending, and conscientious farmers have daily contact with the creatures under their care. Although free-range birds enjoy far greater freedom to scratch about in the grass, soil and sun than their counterparts confined to a barn, a farmer must ensure they are safe and have plenty of access to water, feed and shelter. That necessitates several check-ins each day.

At Someday Farm, we raise our birds on pasture and GMO-free feed. Grazing alone will not provide the necessary vitamins and minerals for a turkey's proper growth, so the combination of forage and high-quality feed leads to a more flavorful, juicier—and healthier—bird. We process poultry in our on-farm, state-inspected facility. That means less stress on the birds, which results in better-tasting meat.

Customers often assume their holiday turkey has lived for a couple of years and are surprised to learn that turkeys are processed at four

to five months. To accommodate a spectrum of desired weights, we raise two batches of turkeys. The first group arrives as day-old chicks in early July and the second batch in early August. The July birds generally achieve 25 to 30 pounds and the August birds weigh in the 12- to-25-pound range.

Months before the chicks arrive, we disc the fields and seed cover crops that the birds will forage later that summer. Land is managed so the turkeys have access to sufficient fresh pasture through November. A rule of thumb is no more than 100 birds per acre of pasture.

The chicks spend the first two weeks in draft-free sheds and stay warm under a propane brooder. We check on the fragile birds several times a day to make sure the temperature remains 90 to 95 degrees. Even in a brooder, one cold night can kill off young chicks. If too cold, they pile onto one another for warmth, which can result in suffocation. It's also crucial to keep the floor covered in fresh shavings as clean, dry bedding reduces chance of disease.

After two weeks, the chicks emerge from their cozy shelter and venture onto fresh grass. They need to be trained to come out of the brooder shed, which is opened at first light, and be ushered back in at dusk. This step is much like hardening off tender plants in the spring, removing them from the stable greenhouse atmosphere and gradually exposing them to the fluctuating elements of spring. The same holds



true for turkey chicks. The sooner a farmer can harden them off, the sooner they gain the benefits of foraging.

Since the chicks are quite small and vulnerable, predators pose a serious risk. Hawks and owls can swoop in from above, while coyotes, fox, skunks and weasels present a terrestrial threat. Coyotes and fox remain a constant challenge the entire season. To pasture poultry means you *will* lose birds to predators.

Birds peck at the soil in search of worms and bugs, and fresh turf is essential for their health. Moving birds onto new pasture reduces exposure to potential pathogens in the soil and increases nourishment. Portable electro-net fencing encircles the designated area, keeping predators out and turkeys in. We move the fencing several times per week depending on how intensely the birds have grazed.

Turkeys love to forage seed crops such as corn, millet and sorghum. They also thrive on high-protein greens like turnips, kale, mustards and rapeseed. Foraging amid tall corn plants or other dense cover crops provides shade in the heat of a summer day. And contrary to popular myth, turkeys *are* smart enough to seek shelter in the rain.

High-quality grain is our largest expense. Pastured birds still need free access to their feeding troughs. A four-month-old turkey consumes approximately five and a half pounds of feed every two weeks. Multiply that by 400 turkeys, and the grain bill borders on staggering.

Facts and figures aside, these turkeys do lead a pretty sweet life. They bask in the sun, graze lush forages, slurp up water and “talk” all day, an amusing cackle/chortle/burble. My favorite task is spreading truckloads of dry leaves or shredded paper around the airy pole barn where they live once they graduate from the brooder sheds. They romp in the fresh bedding like kids in fall leaf piles, calling out to one another and making a joyful ruckus.

The weekend before Thanksgiving, a team of 15 dedicated friends convene at the farm to process the turkeys in a wet, cold, loud, intense two-day marathon. We fuel ourselves on coffee, donuts, bagels, chili and beer. Comrades committed to get an important job done well.

Edible readers care how their food is raised. If turkey is the center of your meal, invest in a bird that deserves that honor. 🍁

When Maria Reade says “we,” she really means Eben Proft, the red-headed guru who manages the turkeys at Someday Farm while also running Woodbury Gamebirds, his pheasant operation.

