The Tragic Turkey Trade

Wild Turkeys

The wild ancestors of intensively-reared turkeys – the victims of modern agriculture – are lively and enterprising birds who, in spite of their heavy weight, display considerable prowess.

Wild turkeys are found in South America and live in small groups in open forest, feeding on insects, seed and fallen fruit. They have excellent hearing and eye sight, and, with a field vision of 270 degrees, can elude many hunters. Their vocabulary is complicated, with different calls to let other birds know about dangers or else that all is well; to communicate contentment when they are together in safe groups; or to warn when they are flying over water.

A wild turkey can run at speeds of up to 20mph and can burst into flight, approaching speeds between 50-55mph in a matter of seconds. Turkeys fly to their roosts around sunset and spend the night in trees. At first light they fly to the ground and feed until mid-morning. They resume feeding later in the afternoon.

Females stay with their eggs more-or-less constantly for the four weeks it takes for them to hatch. When hunger drives birds to leave the nest for a short period, they display great caution, never returning twice by the same route. If any predator approaches while they are sitting on the nest, hens flatten themselves on the ground, trying to appear invisible, but they will never leave either their eggs or their chicks to the mercy of an aggressor. Even after the eggs are hatched, mother turkeys continue to take loving care of their brood.

In the wild, turkeys can live up to 10 years.

Modern Farmed Turkeys

Approximately 20 million turkeys are killed each year in the UK. Most will have been reared on factory farms.

Breeding

Today, turkeys are selectively bred to be as large, and therefore as 'meaty', as possible. Male turkeys can weigh around 36kg (80lb) – more than four times as much as their wild relatives. Due to their enormous weight, male farmed turkeys are not only earthbound, but also too broad-breasted even to mate naturally. The industry's solution: artificial insemination (AI).

AI involves a team of operators 'milking' the breeding males (stags) two or three times a week for their semen. They do this by stimulating the genital area until an erection is achieved and the semen ejected – a kind of human-to-bird masturbation. The stress endured by these sensitive and nervous creatures has never been investigated, but can be imagined. Then the females must be inseminated, through a length of tubing inserted into the vagina. Two or three operators are required to perform this unnatural apology for the real thing.

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Once the parent stock have passed their peak of semen-giving and egg laying, they are slaughtered, and processed into pies, sausages etc.

Housing

There are two main systems of turkey rearing: windowless units similar to broiler sheds for chickens (larger ones housing around 15,000 birds) and 'pole barns', which have open sides and are naturally lit and ventilated. In both systems, the stocking density is very tight, and by the time the birds reach slaughter age (between 12 and 26 weeks) they are thick on the ground. In the windowless units, the sheds are dimly-lit, and the environment devoid of natural ventilation. The smell is rank and cloying.

Because lighting intensity can be extremely low to minimise aggression, debeaking is less common under this system. When first questioned, the Ministry of Agriculture – now DEFRA – gave Animal Aid the figure of between 75 - 80% of all turkeys suffering the mutilation of debeaking, and we publicised this information. Following protests from the British Turkey Federation, MAFF then revised its figure to "under 20%". In pole barns, most (perhaps all) birds are debeaked, because without the quietening influence of semi-darkness, aggression and cannibalism can result. So the 'choice' is between the squalor of the sheds or the chronic pain and depression endured by debeaked poultry.

Mortality in turkey (and all poultry) sheds runs high. Deaths are due to injury, disease – and much of the loss occurs early on in the young birds' lives, when some fail to find the food and water points. As the birds grow, space becomes more restricted and, for some birds, it is physically impossible to fight their way through the crowds to get to the food and water sources. They will die of thirst and starvation. Others collapse due to the intense strain put on their developing legs by their unnaturally obese bodies and, unable to move, suffer the same fate. Before they die, they will try to drag themselves along the ground using their wings. These deaths are known in the industry as 'starve-outs', and are of little concern to the farmer, who will build loss of stock into the economics of his business. Farm workers are supposed to clear dead birds out of the barns daily, but it is nigh on impossible to cover the entire floor area of the barns – due to the amount of birds packed in – and invariably corpses are left to rot.

Foot and leg problems abound in farmed turkeys. Ammonia in the wet, urine and excreta-soaked litter in which they are forced to stand and lie down – which will not be changed for the duration of their lives – causes ulcerated feet and hock burns and can literally burn away their breast feathers. The birds will be covered in their own waste. Aggression amongst the stressed birds can lead to terrible injuries, especially to the eyes, or gaping wounds from pecking at each other.

Catching And Transport

Catching and transportation for slaughter is another problem area. It is not easy to handle large, frightened birds. Catching teams are sent in to round up the birds and cram them into crates that are loaded onto the back of transporter lorries. Rough and violent treatment of the turkeys by catchers is widespread and creates added stress, leading frequently to dislocated or broken legs and wings. The birds are packed into the crates so tightly some invariably die of suffocation or heat stress en-route to the slaughterhouse.

Slaughter

Turkeys are slaughtered at different ages according to the weight of bird required. Some are killed at 13 weeks, others at 15 or 18 weeks. Those destined to go into processed foods, such as sausages and burgers, are slaughtered at approximately 24 weeks. The killing process is terrifying and gruesome, beginning when they are hung upside down on a conveyor belt. Tales of cruelty to turkeys at the time of slaughter abound.

A mature stag weighs around the same as an 8-9 year-old child. Turkeys are permitted to be shackled upside down by their ankles for up to six minutes, before being electrically stunned. A huge percentage of adult birds suffer from diseases of the hip joints – the strain on their legs and the pain of the shackles can be guessed at.

As with chickens, the first stage of the slaughter process is the stunning bath, the stated purpose of which is to render the birds unconscious before having their throats cut. According to researchers at the Agricultural and Food Research Council (AFRC), Institute of Food Research, Langford, Bristol, 26% of turkeys they surveyed at slaughter received painful pre-stun shocks (i.e. accidental electric shocks) when their dangling wings touched the electrically-charged water before their heads did, or when the ramp leading to the bath became electrically live.

Most birds are killed by an automatic knife that slices their necks. This method is far from foolproof and some turkeys, having been inefficiently stunned by the waterbath, will not be dead at this stage. Studies have indicated that every year, tens of thousands of turkeys, having survived the stun bath and the neck-cutter, may be entering the scalding tank (which loosens their feathers for easier plucking) alive and perhaps conscious.

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