



# turkeys



## what are they?

Domestic turkeys are large fowl, descended from the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) of Mexico and domesticated around 2,000 years ago. Turkeys are kept for their meat, most often to supply the Christmas market, especially in the UK, US and Canada. Striking birds, they have bald heads and fleshy protuberances above and below the beak. Mature males ('stags') in particular, have beautiful plumage with large tail feathers and will spend a considerable amount of their time displaying to any females who may be nearby.

Turkeys are highly social birds: they naturally live in single-sex flocks of related birds, up to 20 per flock. They form strong bonds within these flocks and will become aggressive with any intruders. Their preferred habitat is dense woodland, or other vegetation, interspersed with open areas. Like chickens, they are omnivorous, their natural diet consisting of plant material, insects and even small mammals and reptiles.

Most domestic turkeys kept today are raised intensively indoors. The stocking densities and the flock sizes lead to a number of welfare concerns. In particular, turkeys in these conditions cannot form their natural stable social relationships - aggression increases, with birds often injuring each other.

## what are the benefits?

Turkeys are not difficult to keep if you have sufficient space, and they are entertaining birds with plenty of personality. They are some of the most decorative productive fowl you can have around; the displaying stags are particularly striking.

If you like to eat turkey at Christmas, or any other time, you can ensure the turkey you are eating is a healthy, slow-growing breed, allowed to free range in a natural flock. You can also reduce food miles and play your part in preserving an endangered breed. If you have a smallholding you may be able to gain an income stream producing ethical, sustainable turkey for the Christmas market.

While turkeys are not prolific egg layers they do lay around 2 eggs a week. Their eggs are similar in size and composition to duck eggs - they are rich, and excellent for baking with.

Turkeys can, like chickens, provide some pest control in the garden, as they have a taste for insects. However, they will scratch up, eat and trample your vegetables if allowed unrestricted access.

## what can I do?

**Getting started:** there are 10 standard breeds of turkey in the UK. They're slower growing than commercial, double-breasted breeds but are hardier and can move more freely. The main breeds for meat are the Norfolk Black, Bronze and Bourbon Red. The smaller, more ornamental breeds also produce meat and need less space. Some of these produce more eggs, and some make good mothers and are kept as 'broodies'.

You can buy young 'poults' from a day old, though they need a heat lamp or plate until they're at least 6 weeks old. You can buy 6-week-old 'off heat' turkeys for a bit more, or adult breeding stock. Buying fertile eggs is an option, particularly if you can't source the breed you want. Incubating and hatching eggs isn't hard with a little research. You'll need an incubator and heat lamp, plus an indoor space (e.g. a draught-proof shed) until they're ready to go outside.

Introducing a new turkey to a flock can be a slow process due to the tendency to gang up on outsiders. If possible, buy your whole flock together. If you introduce new turkeys, add two at a time rather than a single turkey.

**Housing:** turkeys are curious, and need to forage; allow them the space for this. 3 can be kept in a large garden, ideally with trees, shrubs or some sort of artificial cover. They need shelter at night in well-ventilated housing, secure from predators. A pair should have at least 1.5m<sup>2</sup> of floor space, more for stags. For a small flock, a garden shed is ideal, with a perch of c. 8cm diameter, 75cm off the ground. For large breeds, provide a soft landing below the perch, e.g. a bed of shavings.

Stags tend not to fly but hens can. The larger and more interesting their area, the less likely they will be to fly out of it. A 1m high fence may be enough deterrence, but some hens may fly over even a much higher fence.



*Hen turkey with young poults.*

## turkeys



lowimpact.org



*Pied or Crollwitzer turkey; a smaller turkey, often kept as a dual-purpose bird.*

**Feeding:** commercially-produced compound feeds are labelled 'starter' (up to 8 weeks), 'grower' (up to 18 weeks) and 'breeder'. Soya-free and organic feeds are available. At the starter and grower stages turkeys require more protein than other poultry and must be fed pellets specifically formulated for turkeys. You can mix your own feed using grains, legumes, seeds and meal worms to reduce food miles and avoid unsustainable ingredients. Some sources suggest you may not provide your birds with a balanced diet, but many people do so with success. It's more likely to be a good option if your birds range freely and forage. Turkeys should have grit and clean water at all times, plus oyster shell if laying.

**Health:** turkeys, need a dust bath to control lice and mites. Provide a box of dry soil and sand, or a covered area where they can dig their own dust bath. Protect it from the rain, and add diatomaceous earth to help protect your turkeys from parasites. If your birds do get lice or mites, add lice powder to the dust bath – it's less stressful than trying to apply it directly yourself. Prevent red mite by cleaning their shed with a pressure washer, special detergent and/or a steam cleaner. Afterwards, dust the house with diatomaceous earth or a mite powder (organic products are available). Plastic houses don't provide a hospitable habitat for mites. Blackhead is caused by a parasitic worm and can be a serious problem. The first sign is bright yellow diarrhoea - contact your vet if you see this. To prevent blackhead, don't keep turkeys with chickens or on land previously occupied by chickens or turkeys that have had blackhead; use

pasture rotation; worm them every 3 months with Flubenvet. For most poultry you can reduce chemical wormers (to avoid contributing to resistance to medications) with good pasture management and 'faecal egg counts'. Unfortunately, this isn't recommended with turkeys due to the seriousness of blackhead. Check your flock every day and find a good vet who can be contacted in an emergency.

**Meat production & slaughter:** it's legal to slaughter turkeys at home for consumption by you and your family provided it's done humanely; but turkeys are more difficult to dispatch than smaller poultry and there are more restrictions on the methods used, particularly for birds over 5kg. See the Humane Slaughter Association for more information. To sell your meat, you must register with your local authority. Follow hygiene regulations and have your premises inspected by Environmental Health regularly. Contact the Food Standards Agency for further information.

**Paperwork and regulations:** you have to register with DEFRA and standard regulations apply if you keep more than 50 birds (including other poultry).

## resources

- see [lowimpact.org/turkeys](http://lowimpact.org/turkeys) for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Don Shrider, *Raising Turkeys*
- J Houghton Wallace, *Not Just for Christmas*
- Michael Robers, *Turkeys at Home*
- [chickens.allotment-garden.org/keeping-turkeys](http://chickens.allotment-garden.org/keeping-turkeys) – lots of info on keeping turkeys
- [rbst.org.uk/Pages/Category/turkeys-watchlist](http://rbst.org.uk/Pages/Category/turkeys-watchlist) – turkey breeds
- [alankrakauer.org/?p=1108](http://alankrakauer.org/?p=1108) – social life of wild turkeys



*Turkey egg.*

Feel free to upload, print and distribute this sheet as you see fit. 220+ topics on our website, each with introduction, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, advice, articles, videos and tutorials. Let's build a sustainable, non-corporate system.

[facebook.com/lowimpactorg](https://facebook.com/lowimpactorg)

[Lowimpact.org](http://Lowimpact.org)

[twitter.com/lowimpactorg](https://twitter.com/lowimpactorg)

Registered in England. Company Ltd. by Guarantee no: 420502