

Heritage Breed Turkeys

Karma Glos, Kingbird Farm

In the spirit of diversity I ventured into the world of heritage breeds this season. It only made sense; after all, we raise Tamworth pigs, Highland cattle, and Haflinger horses. Of course heritage breed turkeys would fit right in! Many of my customers had long expressed interest in trying an old type of turkey for their thanksgiving tables and believed I was the farmer to try such a thing. It was a wonderful idea, full of hope and



promise...or was it a secret plan to drive this farmer to the brink of insanity?

I chose to raise Bourbon Red Turkeys which appeared to me to be a good balance between hardiness and meat production. Twenty of these lovely little poults arrived on the farm in early May and proceeded to drive me crazy for months. At first they appeared innocent enough; tiny balls of fluff pecking away at their feed just like the white turkeys that would arrive later in July. Due to their slower growth rate they needed that extra two months to be ready at Thanksgiving with the main flock of Broad Breasted Whites. These initial two months seemed similar to raising whites, all too similar. Despite their reputation of hardiness I still lost the usual 25-50% of poults in the first week. Never has my turkey brooder been so very perfect, and yet I still lost them. At \$8 each these early losses are still very difficult financially as well as emotionally. The typical white turkey price is less than half that. Fortunately losses were confined to the first week and we got down to business raising up the rest. These remaining Bourbon Reds became known as "The Dirty Dozen."

From the moment I began trying to pasture The Dirty Dozen they were trouble. They could fly quite early and had no use for fences. They soon began to roost on the highest locations they could find; the sheds, the house, the truck, and finally the hot tub!! The hot tub incident was really the beginning of my dislike for these creatures. We have a wood fired hot tub on our deck which enables us to survive these winters. One afternoon I spent a great deal of time draining, cleaning, and refilling this hot tub. After this arduous task I went to the barn to help with chores. Upon my return The Dirty Dozen were happily perched around the edge of my newly cleaned tub gleefully pooping into it with big turkey-sized squirts. This was the last straw. Forget "Free-Range" turkey, forget pastured turkey, forget their foraging ability! These malicious creatures were promptly locked up in their shed indefinitely. This made them spiteful and grumpy, but peace was returned to Kingbird Farm for a while. No longer did they roost on my truck, no longer did they trot up to the greenhouse and knock all the pots off the benches. Nor did they make that happy turkey noise that indicates they have escaped and are eagerly chomping down the herbs early in the morning. My stress level plummeted and peace returned, even if only briefly. But this confinement method defied my free-range beliefs and wasted the key talent of these heritage turkeys: their

foraging ability.

Meanwhile, the white turkeys arrived. They fared well enough and we only lost 15% of these "conventional" birds. They grew rapidly and were soon allowed out to the turkey yard. The Dirty Dozen glared out at the White turkeys as the new little poults scratched and foraged gleefully. Within a few weeks I began allowing the Bourbons out into the yard with the Whites dur-

ing the day and then carefully rounding them up before dark to prevent them from roosting atop the sheds (or the hot tub!). This worked moderately well as the Bourbons became bonded with the well-behaved Whites and stayed within the fences most of the time. Once they were all fully feathered I began pasturing them within electric netting. The Bourbons seem to respect this fence if it is on and they are well fed. They still tend to roost on top of the shed instead of inside it, but return to the white turkeys each morning. The flock has bonded and even when the Bourbons remember to fly over the fence, they don't wander far and always return by evening. They are still light enough to fly very well. Their body weight does not out grow their wings as it does with the Broad Breasted Whites.

Despite the lull in the dirty deeds carried out by the Dirty Dozen, they still cause trouble. During the very writing of this article I heard the happy cackle of loose turkeys and looked out to see red turkeys streaking by towards the greenhouses. I quickly threw on my boots and herded them back down to the turkey pasture. Not only was part of the fence down, but the charger was completely dismantled and covered with turkey poop! These birds are too smart! Meanwhile, the now loose white turkeys just stood around by the feeder expecting a meal.

It may seem obvious by now that I do not recommend these birds. They did not work in our system. Perhaps if we were set up to raise pheasants with covered runs, or we didn't care that they ran amuck, it may work. But why? The initial investment is very high. They take nearly twice as long to grow out. And finally I have found very few customers who are willing to shell out the extra money for such a bird. I'm sure they will taste delicious, but I have never been disappointed by the flavor of a well raised white turkey. Feed conversion is going to be amazing on these Bourbon Reds, but the stress and extra management is not worth it.

For a positive view of the Bourbon Red and other heritage breed turkeys I recommend checking with the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (www.albc-usa.org), Slow Food (slowfood.com), and of course other farmers.

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