



John Wayne, a seven-year-old Royal Palm turkey tom at JR Farms in Laramie, Wyoming, in 2023. Wayne is accompanied by a two-year-old Bielefelder hen. Photo by Ellie Riske.

# Tired of chickens? Try raising turkeys

**W**hether you're out hunting or tending to a backyard flock, hearing a turkey gobble gives most people a thrill of excitement. Even after a decade of raising Royal Palms, it still puts a smile on my face every time I hear my jakes (juvenile males) and toms talking to the hens.

## Why raise turkeys?

When most people decide to start

raising backyard poultry, they usually start by researching chickens. Then, when farm and feed stores get their chick shipments in, seven or eight (or twenty) fluff puffs come home in a box.

What people might not realize is that *turkeys* also do well in both small backyards and large pastures. In fact, there are many reasons to favor turkeys.

These docile birds make for

excellent additions to any farm, ranch, or backyard. In addition to their agreeable disposition and loyalty, turkeys develop excellent meat, produce eggs, reduce the need for artificial hatching in incubators, and aid in insect and pest control. Turkeys are also known for their cleanliness, especially compared to chickens.

While turkey chicks can be more difficult to find locally than chickens,

many turkey hatcheries can be found easily online.

### Choosing a variety

Different varieties of turkeys were developed with different purposes in mind. If you're raising turkeys for the first time, consider starting with some of the more popular heritage varieties. Compared to commercial varieties, heritage birds typically grow more slowly, forage more effectively, and are more intelligent. If the goal is to keep turkeys for eggs, some of the heritage varieties are good options.

Each variety is known for different traits. For example, the Beltsville Small White is known for being the smallest breed and the White Holland for being the calmest. Bourbon Reds are known for their mothering tendencies and ability to sustain their line; Narragansetts for their foraging prowess; Slates for their smooth, rich flavor; and Bronzes for their hardiness and size. Royal Palms are known for their egg production, broodiness, and ability to control insect populations, while Blacks are known for rapid growth.

If the turkeys are raised for meat purposes only, there are several other varieties to consider. The two most common are the Broad Breasted Bronze and the Broad Breasted White, both of which grow exceptionally quickly. In just 16 to 22 weeks, turkeys bred for meat will be ready to butcher. They can easily reach more than 30 pounds and, if left longer on feed, they may get too big to fit in your oven.

Turkeys can also be raised for egg production, but they are not prolific

layers. If your primary motivation for raising poultry is to produce large quantities of eggs, chickens are a better option.

### Shelter

While turkeys and chickens have similar basic requirements for shelter, food, and water, there are some notable differences.

Like chickens, turkeys require nest boxes, roosts, floor space, a run or pasture, feeders, and waterers. However, their nest boxes are typically 50 percent larger than those designed for chickens. If a shelter is designed and built to accommodate the largest species, turkeys can be housed with other birds. If this is not possible, the turkeys should be housed separately.

On average, most turkeys need approximately four times the space of a chicken, anywhere from 6 to 10 square feet per bird. If you do not provide turkeys with enough space, they will wander, potentially off your property. Keeping turkeys contained and on your property can become a problem if they don't have enough space.

Since turkeys prefer to roost high up in trees, the first hurdle is to convince them to spend their nights in the coop. The best way to do this is to provide high and wide perches. Rather than using the edge side of a two-by-four, use the wide side up. Providing wider perches adds stability and helps prevent foot issues in growth and adulthood.

Wider perches also allow turkeys to completely cover their feet with their feathers to protect against

## American Poultry Association Standards

As with chickens, there are standards for most turkey varieties in the American Poultry Association's *Standard of Perfection* book. All varieties listed in the *Standard of Perfection* were developed and produced in the United States.

Accepted varieties currently include:

- Beltsville Small White
- Black
- Bourbon Red
- Bronze
- Narragansett
- Royal Palm
- Slate
- White Holland

frostbite. For additional protection against frostbite, block drafts from entering their coop and allow them to exit their coop and exercise, even on the coldest days.

### Food and water

Turkeys require more water per day than chickens and are more inclined to avoid dirty water. One reason for turkey escapes and wandering off the property could be water availability or quality. In the wild, they may travel several miles in a day for water. If the water provided doesn't meet their standards, they'll go looking for some that does.

Turkeys also require a higher

protein feed than chickens. As chicks, they should typically be started at a 28- to 32-percent protein feed such as a turkey-specific or game bird feed.

### Fairs and exhibitions

In addition to producing meat and eggs, turkeys can be exhibited as

show birds. Most county fairs include a poultry show where children and 4-H'ers can exhibit both market and breeding turkeys. For adults looking to join in the fun, there are several American Poultry Association shows across the country for breeding turkeys.

Even if you don't show your birds,

chances are that people will want to learn all about your turkey-raising endeavor.

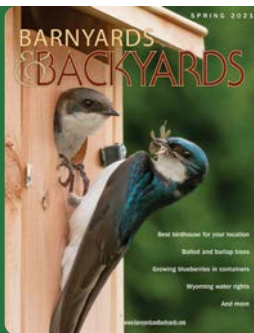
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Poultry expert **Ellie Riske** has raised turkeys in Laramie, Wyoming, for a decade. She is UW Extension's 4-H livestock coordinator and can be reached at [eriske@uwyo.edu](mailto:eriske@uwyo.edu) or (307) 766-5679.

### Getting started

If you're interested in raising turkeys, the following resources are a good starting point.

- National Poultry Improvement Plan: [poultryimprovement.org](http://poultryimprovement.org)
- The Livestock Conservancy: <https://bit.ly/livestock-conservancy-poultry>

Note that purchasing any poultry outside the state of Wyoming requires additional paperwork to be allowed entry into the state. Most large-scale poultry operations already conform to these regulations; however, smaller operations may or may not.



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