



Heritage Turkeys Defined!

"How to Identify a True Heritage Turkey!"

By Jim Adkins, Founder SPN-USA

It is amazing how many turkeys are being sold in North America and being labeled as "Heritage Turkeys" - I often receive emails and calls from people all over the country and they tell me that they have heritage turkeys. But the reality is, a true heritage, standard bred turkey is very hard to find. Unfortunately, most heritage turkeys in North America are not true to breed and should not be used for breeding. This article is intended to help you truly identify a standard bred, heritage turkey and how to discern if you have turkeys that are worthy to be bred or that should be used for thanksgiving dinner!

First and foremost, remember that a heritage turkey is a *standard bred* turkey. You must identify and breed your turkeys based on the Standard of Perfection. The Standard is published by the *American Poultry Association*, the oldest livestock organization in North America. Organized in 1873, the first edition of the Standard of Perfection was published a year later, in 1874. The Standard is your guide to breeding, selecting and growing your heritage turkeys. It is the authority in which ALL turkeys must be identified and evaluated. There are (8) varieties of turkeys that are recognized by the APA. There are (7) non-standard varieties of heritage turkeys that are not recognized, often because of low population size. Some of these varieties were quite populous and had economic importance. In either case, seeking the standard description of type, confirmation and color is of upmost importance if you are going to identify a true, heritage bird! Every turkey enthusiast must have a copy of the "*poultry Bible!*"

As a breeder, a grower or even a consumer of standard bred, heritage turkeys, listed below are (4) very important questions that you should ask to find out if you have a true heritage turkey:

Question #1 - What is the average "live weight" of each bird?

Unfortunately, turkeys that are raised in the commercial industry are fast growing birds that weight too much! They gain such rapid weight that it effects their ability to walk, to function naturally and even to mate naturally. As a result of poor selection of breeding stock, the weights of standard bred, heritage turkeys has done just the opposite! They do not weigh enough. Almost every hatchery line of heritage turkeys is way too small. The Standard says, birds that are underweight and overweight are disqualified. Weight is a breed characteristic. It goes on to state that, any bird (except Beltsville Small White Turkeys) that deviates more than 20% up or down from the weight listed for its breed, sex and age should be disqualified.

For example, probably the most popular of colors, the standard Bronze tom should weight the following: White Hollands should be the same as the Bronze.

- young tom: 25 pounds @ 28 weeks.
- yearly tom: 33 pounds @ 52 weeks.
- adult tom: 36 pounds (a tom does not quit growing until he is 18 months old!)

Bourbon Reds, Slates and Naragansetts:

- young tom: 23 pounds @ 28 weeks.
- yearly tom: 30 pounds @ 52 weeks.
- adult tom: 33 pounds (a tom does not quit growing until he is 18 months old!)

The old guys always said that to market good standard bred turkey the toms should gain a pound a week. A good White Holland or Bronze tom at 20 weeks should weigh in at 20 pounds live weight. 24 weeks a tom should weigh in at 24 pounds live weight and a 28 week old tom should weigh in at 28 pounds live weight. With hens it is different.

A 20 week old Bronze or White Holland hen should weigh in at 10 to 12 pounds and a 28 week old hen should weigh in at 16 to 18 pounds live weight. A Bronze or White Holland tom should weigh in at no least the 33 pounds before they are one year old. It should be 36 pounds in 36 weeks. They should level off at 40 to 42 pounds at breeding age the following spring. These was the standard when standard bred turkeys were the main market.

I worked in the commercial turkey industry for several years, watching genetically engineered turkeys that cannot naturally reproduce and gain weight at a very fast, unnatural rate of growth! They grow to be an unusually large weight very quickly. This should not be! I am not in favor of the "*man-made*" industrial turkeys. Actually, I am adamantly opposed. But, I also want you to realize that most of the so-called Heritage turkeys in North America are way underweight. If you are interested in breeding standard bred turkeys, like standard bronze, Bourbon reds, Narragansetts or slate turkeys - it is critical that you weigh your adult birds BEFORE you ever put them into your breeding pen. Adult turkeys must be close to the necessary standard weights; if they aren't, they should not be used in a breeding pen.

Remember turkeys are a meat bird! That is their primary purpose. Their weight is everything. And I don't mean overweight; they must be within the weights of the *Standard of Perfection*. Birds with proper weights mean that we end up with a 20-24 pound dressed carcass. Live bird weight will result in a carcass that weighs about (4) pounds less. A heritage turkey will gain about (1) pound for every week of their age. Weight is of utmost importance.

Question #2 - What is your feed conversion of your turkeys?

How much feed do your turkeys eat? This is a very important question. The average heritage turkey will eat (4) pounds of feed for every pound of weight that it gains. The commercial, industrial turkey will eat about (2) pounds of feed for every pound gained. Your heritage, standard bred turkeys must be slow growing and gain weight accordingly. Obviously, to track these details will require you to keep records of your feeding program.

Question #3 - What is the fertility & hatchability rate of the eggs you set to hatch?

Question number three is, how many eggs that you set to hatch are actually fertile? And how many actually hatch? This will tell you a lot about your breeding flock. The average

fertility rate should be 75% or higher. In other words, out of 100 eggs, no more than 25 of the eggs should be infertile. Fertile eggs tells us that your toms have good vigor and vitality. It tells us that the hens are "squatters" - a squatting hen is a good breeder. If your egg fertility is less than 75%, you need to address this in your breeding program. Let me remind you at this point, it is important that all your turkeys are able to naturally mate. As you may or may not know, 100% of all the commercial, fast growing turkeys are unable to do so.

The next critical record keeping is, how many of the fertile eggs hatch? In a good breeding flock, it should be no less than 70%. So, another critical question is, how many eggs were fertile and actually hatched after 28 days of incubation? A good breeder of heritage turkeys must be able to answer this question. One other point to make at this point, your breeding hens should produce about 100 eggs each year.

Question #4 - What is your mortality rate (especially the first 48 hours of life)?

Fourth and final question is, after the eggs have hatched, what percentage of poults actually lived for their entire life? As you may or may not know, keeping poults alive after they hatch can be a real challenge. If you are breeding, hatching and growing heritage turkeys, your mortality rate should not be more than 5%! That is our goal! Good genetics, good feed, good environment will equal low mortality. I raised standard bred turkeys for 25+ plus years and then went to work in the industry where I had to learn about antibiotics, probiotics and turkey medications, etc. This is all because of hybridized breeding that creates turkeys with poor immune systems. True heritage bred turkeys with proper feed and a stress-free environment will result in very low mortality rates. Make this your goal.

So how do we keep track of all these details? Record keeping. Grab a spiral notebook or create a spreadsheet and start keeping these statistics. Whatever it takes! You cannot afford to not do this. You will not breed good birds without these details.

If someone calls me and tells me you claim to be breeding heritage turkeys, I will point them unto these four questions. Or I will ask these questions of you myself! Honestly, if you cannot answer these questions, I will discourage people from buying turkeys from you. I would say that you are not really breeding true heritage turkeys. If we are going to preserve these turkeys; we must breed them to the very best of our ability. If you don't have a *APA Standard of Perfection* - you need to buy one as quickly as possible.

You will notice that I did not mention color in this article; the color of your breeding flock should always be bred to the standard as well. It is important but these four areas must be addressed first! Then perfect the color. If you have good color with poor fertility, poor hatchability, poor live-ability, and an underweight turkey - you have a poor turkey. It is not heritage!

Lastly, if you desire to become a great breeder of standard bred turkeys, in addition to purchasing a *Standard of Perfection*, I would recommend two books; *Turkey Management* by Stanley Marsden & J. Holmes Martin – Third edition published in 1945. If you are raising turkeys, breeding turkeys and need the book that covers it all, this is the one resource that you must have. The other is the newly released *Storey's Guide to Raising Turkeys* by my good friend, Don Schrider. Both of these books are excellent resources for you.

If you have any questions you are welcome to contact me; jim@spnusa.com or call 209.890.5326. I hope that you are able to breed some TRUE heritage turkeys.

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