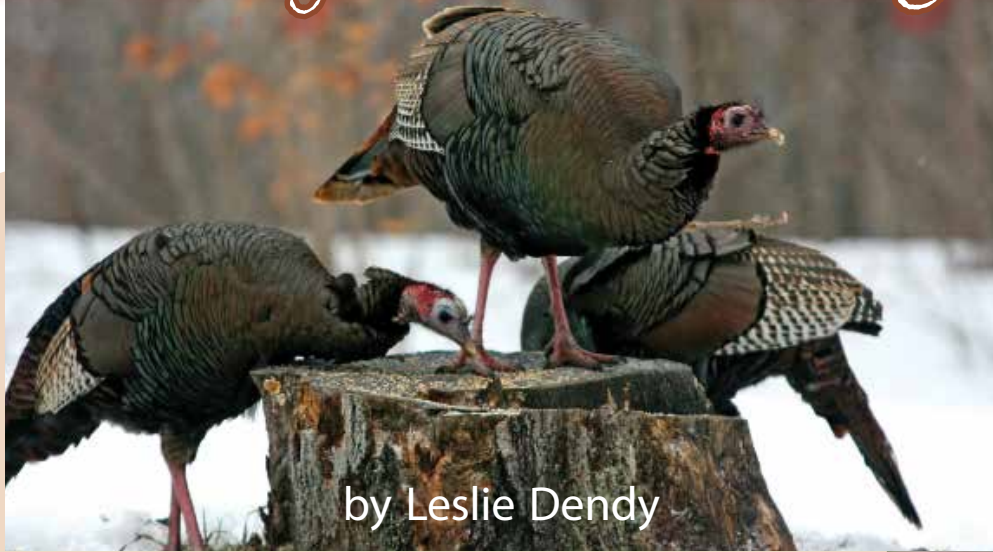


What Turkeys Eat for Thanksgiving



by Leslie Dendy

MOST PEOPLE THINK of a turkey as a golden-brown bird that comes out of an oven. But let's think for a moment about turkeys having dinner instead of being dinner.

Long before any humans arrived in North America, millions of wild turkeys were strutting around in the woods. They're still here, in forests from coast to coast, although it may be hard to catch a glimpse of them. They can run as fast as horses and they can fly up to fifty-five miles per hour.

Wild turkeys are big birds with big appetites to match. They gobble-gobble almost everything in sight. They eat lots of ordinary bird food such as seeds, berries, and insects, but they don't stop there. They also gulp down frogs, lizards, salamanders and snakes, grapes and grass—and even crabs and cactus fruits.



They don't chew their food, because turkeys have no teeth. Like other birds, they swallow their meals in chunks, then wait for their gizzards to grind everything up. The gizzard is a tough, muscular sort of stomach with hard ridges inside. As the muscles squeeze tight, the ridges crush the food. There are usually stones inside, too, which the birds have swallowed to improve the grinding action. (You can see a gizzard in the bag of giblets packed inside a grocery-store turkey.)

Scientists have done experiments with turkeys to find out just how tough their gizzards are. In the 1600s an Italian professor named Giovanni Borelli pushed glass balls and lead cubes down the throats of several unfortunate turkeys. By the next day, the glass balls were

Mommy and babies perch in a tree for a good night's sleep.

crumbled, and the metal cubes were flattened. About a hundred years later another Italian, Lazzaro Spallanzani, discovered that a turkey gizzard could break up surgical knife blades. So, if a wild turkey swallows hard acorns or pecans with shells, no problem!

Turkeys eat together in family groups. A whole flock will march through a forest, its members clucking to keep track of each other. The turkeys scratch through the fallen leaves with their feet to find nuts or pine seeds. At night they fly up into trees and roost together.



Why did the turkey chow down its food?
Because it was a gobbler.





Baby turkeys can walk almost as soon as they hatch. They follow their mothers around for protection from turkey-eaters such as bobcats, foxes, and owls. The babies eat lots of food, especially grasshoppers, and they grow fast. They can fly when they are only two weeks old.



Newly hatched baby turkeys



Wild turkeys are thinner than domesticated turkeys, and their tails are tipped with brown, not white.

Hundreds of years ago, before any Europeans came to America, Native Americans hunted wild turkeys in the woods. They ate them and used their feathers to decorate clothes, arrows, and blankets. They even made beads and spoons out of turkey bones.

When the Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts, they started eating the wild turkeys the Indians were already eating. Naturally, several turkeys ended up in the first Thanksgiving dinner in 1621. That is how our custom of having turkey on Thanksgiving got started.



Spider, Thistle wants to sit next to me.



Could you sit with your cousins at the kids' table?

WHAT!!!

Why did the turkey cross the road?
To prove she wasn't chicken!



That was nearly four hundred years ago. Most of us don't find wild turkey on our dinner plates now. The turkeys we buy at the grocery store are extra-heavy ones that were raised on turkey farms. Those turkeys are not smart enough to survive in the woods. The only thing they ever eat is turkey feed made from ground corn and soybeans with vitamins and minerals added.

But it's fun to imagine what would happen if a real, live wild turkey showed up at your house on Thanksgiving. It could gobble up the salad greens, the fruits, the corn, some chestnuts or mushrooms from the stuffing, pecans from the pie . . . Hey, do you ever serve grasshoppers?

