



For Immediate Release

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Conserving Turkeys of Thanksgivings Past for the Future

The Livestock Conservancy Publishes Heritage Turkey Breeding and Selection Information

(Pittsboro, NC) – The Livestock Conservancy is pleased to announce the release of a new Heritage Turkey resource entitled *Selecting Your Best Turkeys for Breeding*. This is the second publication in the Master Breeder series, which is a collaboration of known master breeders, researchers, and staff working together to codify knowledge and historic information about heritage breed selection, husbandry and breeding.

With growing consumer demand for tasty Heritage Turkeys to grace their holiday tables, more farmers are trying their hands at raising them. However, farmers often find themselves struggling to find production information specific to raising these colorful cousins of the Broad-Breasted White turkey found in supermarket freezers. Since the industrialization of turkeys in the late 1950s, much of the knowledge and printed information on how to select, raise and breed traditional turkeys has slowly been lost.

The information found in *Selecting Your Best Turkeys for Breeding* was once widely available at a time when small-scale agriculture and pastured-poultry keeping was commonplace. Changes in agricultural practices have caused this information to be largely lost to subsequent generations.

“The Livestock Conservancy recognized that there was a knowledge gap when it came to raising and breeding Heritage Turkeys and many other rare breeds,” said Research and Technical Program Director Marjorie Bender. “If we want to establish a sustainable market for these birds, we’ve got to give the farmers the tools they need to raise and breed quality animals.”

As people once again become interested in the systems suited to rare breeds, it is extremely important that the knowledge once used to successfully manage these systems be made available again. The Livestock Conservancy is pleased to lead the effort to re-educate the entrepreneurial farmer in the production of one of America’s agricultural treasures, the Heritage Turkey.

As recently as 1997, Heritage Turkeys were in danger for extinction – remembered only by the “old-timers”. At that time, only 1,335 breeding birds were found in the United States. Today, thanks to the efforts of breeders, producers and consumers, the Heritage Turkey’s numbers are on the rise, with a reported 2006 census number of 10,404 birds.

A Brief Timeline of the Domesticated Turkey

2000 years ago	Domestication of the turkey by Aztecs in Mexico and Mayans in Central America
Early 1500	Cortez and Spanish explorers find both wild and domesticated turkeys
1500 - 1519	Turkey first taken back to Spain
1500s	Several European varieties were developed including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Norfolk Black• Cambridgeshire Bronze• White Austrian• Buff• Blue• Ronquieres (a small variegated Belgian variety)
By 1600	Turkeys were found throughout Europe. Turkey was widely used in celebrations and holiday feasts and was well regarded for its sumptuous meat.
Early 1600	European varieties of turkeys return to North America with colonists.
1621	First Thanksgiving is celebrated at Plymouth Colony. According to folklore wild turkey was served as a main course.
By 1700	Domesticated turkeys were plentiful in the mid-Atlantic region and through the Coastal South.
October 3, 1789	George Washington declared a day of Thanksgiving.
October 3, 1863	Abraham Lincoln officially proclaimed Thanksgiving as a national holiday. (This has been traditionally celebrated on the last Thursday of November.)
1874	The American Poultry Association (APA) was formed. They established and adopted Standards for five varieties of turkeys: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bronze• Narragansett• White Holland• Black• Slate
1909	Bourbon Red was accepted into the APA <i>Standard of Perfection</i>
1951	Beltsville Small White was accepted into the APA <i>Standard of Perfection</i>
1971	Royal Palm was accepted into the APA <i>Standard of Perfection</i>
1900s	Breeders in Washington and Oregon produced larger birds with broader breasts. These were called Mammoth Bronze.
1927	Jesse Throssel, an immigrant England to British Columbia, Canada, imported two lines of turkeys (a Bronze and a White) that had been selected for greater breast width. These were known as the Cambridgeshire lines.
Late 1930s	Cambridgeshire Bronzes had been crossed into the Mammoth Bronze population, including the renowned Wagon Wheel Ranch strain.
1938	Mrs. H. P. Griffin coined the term "Broad Breasted Bronze." This was a commercial term that meant double-breasted in which mounds of muscle were on both sides of the keel bone.

1950s	Fertility troubles began to occur. Broad-breasted conformation brings with it a shorter keel bone and shorter shanks in addition to the bulkier muscle mass on the breast. This conformation prevents males from effectively mounting females, resulting in lower fertility rates. Industry began to perfect artificial insemination techniques to compensate.
1950s	Large, white feathered varieties were developed. These dressed-out more cleanly. Breeders competed at shows based on side-by-side comparisons of productivity. Breeders include: Amerine, Browning, Gozzi, Jerome, Jones, Keithly, Kimber, Lovelace, Lyons, Nicholas, Rose-a-Linda, and Wrolstad.
1960s	These large white turkeys began appearing in the market. At this time, most consumers purchased dressed birds based on carcass appearance. The white varieties were preferred because they lacked the dark pin feathers and melanin that remained in the carcass of colored feathered birds.
1960s	Artificial insemination became common practice among commercial breeders.
1997	The Livestock Conservancy conducted a census of <i>Standard</i> varieties of turkeys maintained by hatcheries. The total number of breeding birds of all <i>Standard</i> varieties was 1,335. The Livestock Conservancy began actively promoting Heritage Turkeys.
2003	The Livestock Conservancy conducted a second census, including a survey of individual breeders. The total breeding birds of all <i>standard</i> and non-standard varieties was 4,412.
2004 – 2006	The Livestock Conservancy and Virginia Tech conducted research that demonstrated that Heritage Turkeys have more robust immune systems than industrial strains.
2006	The Livestock Conservancy conducted third census. The total breeding birds of all <i>standard</i> and non-standard varieties was 10,404.

Today's International Turkey Industry

Today, only two international companies own most commercial turkey genetics, Aviagen, based in the United Kingdom, and Hybrid, based in Canada. Aviagen now owns the genetic resources of two previously significant commercial companies, Nicholas, from California, and British United Turkeys (BUT) from the United Kingdom. BUT had an American operation, including a breeding farm based in West Virginia. Both Nicholas and BUT offered multiple strains. When Nicholas bought BUT of America in 2004, the American breeding stock was destroyed. Aviagen subsequently purchased Nicholas. As of February 2009, the Aviagen website only offered two strains from each company for sale. This story is of great importance because it shows just how quickly genetic resources can be lost.

The Livestock Conservancy:

The Livestock Conservancy is a nonprofit membership organization working to protect over 180 breeds of livestock and poultry from extinction. Included are donkeys, cattle, goats, horses, sheep, pigs, rabbits, chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys. Founded in 1977, The Livestock Conservancy is the pioneer organization in the U.S. working to conserve historic breeds and genetic diversity in livestock. Its *mission is to ensure the future of agriculture through genetic conservation and the promotion of endangered breeds of livestock and poultry.*