



Taking care of his flock

Turkey rancher's heritage breeds spend their lives in natural comfort

By [Natalie Storey](#) | The New Mexican

11/21/2007

TALUS WIND RANCH — For the owner and caretakers at this Santa Fe County turkey ranch, Thanksgiving is a "plucking crazy" time.

But while Timothy Willms, the owner of the ranch, has had to work hard to select and kill the unlucky fowls of his flock to meet orders for Thanksgiving dinners in Northern New Mexico, the birds are happily ignorant.

Much of the flock spent their last few days of life pecking for twigs, eating alfalfa and chasing their drooping red wattles in large pens on the ranch outside Galisteo. Last week, more than 100 had already been transported to a processing facility in Mountainair, but the remaining hens and toms were not shy. Turkeys have a reputation for being mean, but Willms beckons his hens by calling, "Hi, girls" and waving the shiny bracelet on his wrist, a source of unending awe for a silly hen.



Timothy Willms of Talus Wind Ranch feeds his turkeys lettuce and popcorn. The heritage birds live much like their wild cousins and have no nets or covers on their pens.

"Obviously they are not the brightest creatures," he said.

Willms prefers to label his birds as "naive" and "aloof." Even though he has resigned 150 of them to dinner tables this year, Willms, a former art dealer from Chicago, loves his birds.

"I think they're beautiful," said Willms, who wore a turkey feather in his cowboy hat. "In the sense of trueness to the history of American agriculture. But I guess beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Some people don't understand."

The turkeys at Talus Wind Ranch are part of a national resurgence in raising heritage breeds of the fowl. In 1997, the total population of breeding heritage birds was 1,335; in 2006, the population of breeding birds jumped to 10,404, according to American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. Demand for the turkeys is increasing because consumers and restaurants are more interested in buying natural, locally grown turkeys as opposed to mass-marketed brands like Butterball, Willms said. Santa Fe restaurants have also caught onto the trend — Willms is selling turkeys to Tulips, the Galisteo Inn and the Blue Heron Restaurant.

Willms' birds are more expensive than the store-bought kind. They weigh 8 to 20 pounds and cost \$6.25 a pound. He says the birds are worth the price because everything they eat can be traced back to the natural stuff he feeds them on his ranch.

"People should understand and restaurants should understand that if they want to know where

wine comes from they should want to know where their meat comes from," Willms said. "There's nothing wrong with knowing where your food comes from."

Turkeys can only be called heritage if they mate naturally, have a long lifespan and slower growth rates. Willms' turkeys take 10 to 18 months to mature, while mass-produced turkeys can mature within eight weeks, he said.

Butterball turkeys cannot fly, Willms said, nor can they breed on their own because they have been genetically engineered to have huge, white breasts that make coupling impossible. Willms' turkeys breed as they would in the wild. Willms said his birds have a higher proportion of dark meat and their meat is richer, smoother and softer.

Kerry Mower, a wildlife health specialist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, said turkeys might get the reputation for being stupid because mass-produced, domesticated birds really aren't smart. When the birds get scared, Mower said, they are known to crowd together, and sometimes the ones on the bottom of the pile can die from suffocation.

"The domestic turkeys do some things that baffle human beings," he said. "Wild turkeys are slim and fast, and they are smart. They do have a large breast, but not this overdeveloped breast like domestic birds."

Wild turkeys also have good eyesight, Mower said, which makes them among the most difficult fowl to hunt.

Mower has a soft spot in his heart for turkeys and has helped Willms with his flock. He said Thanksgiving is a good time to remind people that Benjamin Franklin thought the turkey should have been named the national bird instead of the bald eagle. Franklin reportedly thought the turkey was more respectable.

Turkeys are native to New Mexico, and the state today has a large population of wild birds. Mower said he knows of two turkey ranches in New Mexico where owners are trying to breed the native birds, and he said interest in them has increased nationally.

Willms said he wants his birds to live as much like their wild cousins as possible so there are no nets or covers on their pens. His turkeys are free to fly out whenever they wish, but they mostly stay nearby. Willms has also gone through special steps to make sure his turkeys' deaths are as comfortable as possible. That includes specially designed chutes and other slaughtering procedures to calm the birds and put them through the least amount of stress possible. Willms said Dr. Temple Grandin, an autistic known for her connection to animals, reviewed photos of his slaughterhouse.

Even though he has to kill some of his birds, Willms said, he loves Thanksgiving.

"I like how we have a chance to look at things and understand what's essential in life," Willms said. "And food is one of them. I say a prayer and bless the fact that (the turkeys) came into my life."

Contact [Natalie Storey](mailto:nstorey@sfnewmexican.com) at 986-3026 or nstorey@sfnewmexican.com.