

All-American Thanksgiving turkeys? They're from Mexico

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A wild turkey struts by the Maya ruins of Tikal in Guatemala. Flickr/Adam Jones

This week, Thanksgiving tables across the nation will be full of turkey. While this bird is connected to a very American holiday, it is not actually native to America. Instead, it is American in a way many people don't suspect. The ancestors of the turkeys we eat on Thanksgiving came here from another country.

Erin Thornton studies turkey farming among the ancient Maya. The Maya were a group of people that lived in Mexico from around 4,000 years ago to around 1,000 years ago. Thornton explains that the turkeys we eat now are originally from Mexico. From there, they were taken back to Europe by explorers. Pilgrims brought the turkeys to the east coast of what is now the United States when they came from Europe later on.

Studies have pinpointed the ancestor of the turkeys we eat today. It is a South Mexican wild turkey. There is evidence that suggests that this animal was being traded and raised by humans as early as 2,300 years ago.

Turkeys Weren't Food At First

These turkeys might not have been used for food at first. Instead, turkeys were limited to the elites. They were probably used for religious and cultural events, like ceremonies and feasts.

A study showed there was another type of turkey domesticated in the American Southwest at around the same time. These were also used for religious or cultural purposes. They might have been made into feather blankets or prayer sticks, for example.

This changed by the time the Spanish arrived in the Americas in the 1400s. At that point, the birds were being eaten frequently by both humans and animals.

“The Spanish encountered them very early on when they came to the Americas,” explains Camilla Speller. Speller is an archaeologist at the University of York in England. Turkeys were very common in marketplaces and village farms.

The Spanish liked what they saw. They also presumably enjoyed what they tasted. Speller says the first turkeys were shipped to Europe sometime around the year 1500, where they were a huge success.

“Certainly turkeys spread very rapidly,” she says. “In about a hundred years we can see them spread throughout Europe.”

In Europe, Turkeys Were A Symbol Of Wealth

Turkeys were seen as exciting and new, according to Speller. They were a symbol of wealth.

The famous Thanksgiving feast in Plymouth, Massachusetts, took place in 1621. By this time, turkeys had been in Europe for more than a century.

When Europeans came to the Americas, they tried to recreate their lifestyle. This even involved bringing the animals they had on their farms in Europe, including turkeys. So, these birds that were originally from Mexico were brought back to North America. The turkeys that we eat today are descended from these turkeys that were brought from Europe, says Speller.

Birds Are Mated To Improve Features

Nowadays, the birds are mated with other birds to produce an appetizing product. People try to make sure the turkeys have certain features, like a lot of meat. These changes make turkeys more appealing to Thanksgiving feasters. However, it might also make them more at risk of health problems.

This could lead to health problems because it reduces diversity. When birds are all similar, they are all at risk for the same diseases. The avian flu shows that. So, if a particularly damaging disease comes along, it could wipe them all out.

Long wants to preserve features of rare types of turkey. Nobody knows which of them might hold a trait that proves important for turkeys in the future. Unfortunately, the original ancestor of the Thanksgiving turkey won't be much help. Both of the families that were originally domesticated in the New World are now thought to be extinct.

Quiz

1 Which sentence from the article BEST summarizes a main idea of the article?

- (A) The ancestors of the turkeys we eat on Thanksgiving came here from another country.
- (B) They were probably used for religious and cultural events, like ceremonies and feasts.
- (C) Pilgrims brought the turkeys to the east coast of what is now the United States when they came from Europe later on.
- (D) Both of the families that were originally domesticated in the New World are now thought to be extinct.

2 Read the paragraph from the section "In Europe, Turkeys Were A Symbol of Wealth."

When Europeans came to the Americas, they tried to recreate their lifestyle. This even involved bringing the animals they had on their farms in Europe, including turkeys. So, these birds that were originally from Mexico were brought back to North America. The turkeys that we eat today are descended from these turkeys that were brought from Europe, says Speller.

How does this paragraph support a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) by giving an example of the type of animals Europeans kept on their farms
- (B) by explaining why the Europeans brought turkeys with them to America
- (C) by showing what the European lifestyle was like
- (D) by including clear evidence from an archaeologist

3 Read the sentence from the section "Turkeys Weren't Food At First."

A study showed there was another type of turkey domesticated in the American Southwest at around the same time.

Which sentence from the article explains the meaning of the word "domesticated"?

- (A) Pilgrims brought the turkeys to the east coast of what is now the United States when they came from Europe later on.
- (B) Speller says the first turkeys were shipped to Europe sometime around the year 1500, where they were a huge success.
- (C) Nowadays, the birds are mated with other birds to produce an appetizing product.
- (D) There is evidence that suggests that this animal was being traded and raised by humans as early as 2,300 years ago.

4 Read the first paragraph of the article.

This week, Thanksgiving tables across the nation will be full of turkey. While this bird is connected to a very American holiday, it is not actually native to America. Instead, it is American in a way many people don't suspect. The ancestors of the turkeys we eat on Thanksgiving came here from another country.

What does the word "native" refer to in the paragraph above?

- (A) where the turkey was raised
- (B) where the turkey was first traded
- (C) where the turkey was born
- (D) where the turkey was discovered

