

# The Ridley Bronze Turkeys' Great Escape

By Margaret Thomson

Photo by permission of Performance Poultry



In spring 2008 two batches of Ridley Bronze turkey poults went back to the world that their ancestors had left 27 years before. While housed at University of Saskatchewan they were protected from predators and disease and bred to maintain their genetic diversity. For future generations life will be very different—both more natural and more hazardous.

Their first challenge in May 2008 was surviving the journey to their new homes. One group was misdirected by the airline and went to Edmonton via Toronto, arriving so late at night that the recipient couldn't wait for them and had to return the next day. All survived.

When placing an order most people allow for some mortality, especially if long distance shipping is involved. Survival was so much higher than

expected that several new owners promptly shared their flocks. Losses have continued to be low with a few accidents (caught in poultry netting while owner was absent, picked out of a field by hawks while foraging in the open). Unexplained deaths have been very rare indeed.

Growth rates have been phenomenal: a 17-lb hen at 6 months—I questioned that, but was assured that it was correct. Some examples of weights at Thanksgiving were 16- and 19-lb toms: excellent gains for barely 20 weeks, far earlier than the recommended 28 to 30 week slaughter age. By Christmas, at 6 1/2 months, weights reached 19 and 23 lbs, and consumers noted how juicy and flavourful the birds were. The only reported difficulty has been removing the pin feathers, which can be solved by adjusting the timing of slaughter. The carcass may

be slightly discoloured where dark feathers are pulled, but this cosmetic problem does not affect flavour. Customers need to be warned that this is normal for birds with dark feathers.

The University encouraged the new owners to keep in touch with Rare Breeds Canada, and almost all have done so. One recipient could not afford to keep so many birds and has "re-homed" them without passing on the new owners' names. Another has not responded to my enquiries. The rest are enthusiastic about their new turkeys, describing them as friendly, personable, curious, easy keepers and very good foragers. They kept the best of their original group for breeding.

In the first breeding season it is possible that closely related birds could mate. In a way this is helpful, because any recessive genes would have had chance to express themselves. Anyone

wishing to avoid this possibility should obtain breeding stock from distributions from the university BEFORE 2008. This will ensure that brother-sister matings do not occur.

The Ridleys' progress to date is encouraging, but by no means guarantees their safety. Accidents happen. A cougar in northern BC attacked one poultry farm three times and killed more than 100 chickens and turkeys including all the breeders (not Ridleys). Several farms are in bear country and another is in the heart of Saskatchewan's commercial chicken zone, so at risk if an infectious disease should ever strike.

In January 2009 there were nine known breeding flocks, three predating the 2008 distribution and two of them also receiving poults in 2008, so there is plenty of scope for exchange of breeding stock. It has worked out that every breeder is within reasonable driving distance of at least one other, but more breeders are still needed. Sales of meat birds should be brisk after the recent positive publicity in the Canadian media.

If each breeder kept five hens (some have a lot more) each of which lays five eggs a week for 10 weeks and 80% of them hatch, that is enough poults to establish about 200 new flocks of 10 birds each, capable of maturing in time for the holiday season. If each grower ate seven and kept a breeding trio there would be a whole lot more enthusiastic heritage turkey consumers out there and enough breeding groups for Rare Breeds Canada to stop worrying.

Turkeys keep laying until early Fall, although less frequently once day length shortens. Many breeders keep their later hatched birds as replacements. It shortens the length of time to feed and house them before the next breeding season and has the added benefit of producing lighter-weight toms in early spring. Very heavy toms can cause serious injuries during mating, especially to younger hens, so this is one way to minimize the risk. Saddles are the other.

For 27 consecutive years the Ridleys have been prevented from hatching

their own eggs, although they did show signs of broodiness. My burning question for the new releases is how good will they be as mothers, if allowed the opportunity. I appeal to all new owners to let at least some of their hens try natural hatching. This is a characteristic that is really important if poultry are to survive in remote locations or places where the power is unreliable. Poults that are raised by their mother are less likely to be victims of predators; a turkey hen in defensive mode is a powerful defender of her brood and should be approached with considerable caution.

For sources of Ridley Bronze turkeys in your area contact Margaret Thomson, Turkey Co-ordinator, Rare Breeds Canada at [windrush@telus.net](mailto:windrush@telus.net), check the breeder's list on this website or contact the RBC office.

Margaret Thomson thanks all the Ridley owners who have been so willing to share their experiences and photographs.