

Book Review

By Alicia Karen Elkins

Birds of a Feather by Carolyn J. Christman & Robert O. Hawes is *the* book to own about rare turkey breeds and conservation efforts for this species. Regardless of your current knowledge about turkeys, this book will likely provide you with new information. If you are new to turkeys, this is a great way to get a comprehensive introduction to them.

The first thing you notice about this book is that there is a photograph on almost every page - from old black and white photos taken in early 1900s to the brilliantly colored modern ones - and several illustrations. It is easy to become so engrossed in these photographs and captions that you lose track of time and end up spending an hour or more just looking at them. There are illustrations that show the different feathers and their locations, and the different turkey body parts with their appropriate “turkey terminology.” If you do not know what snoods or caruncles are, this is the section for you. Did you ever wonder if turkeys have ears or where their ears are located? The “Body Conformation” illustration will answer your questions.

The introduction gives the book’s focus as “the historic varieties of domestic turkeys” and explains that many of these varieties are currently on brink of extinction. The authors state that the goal of their book is “... to introduce readers to the beauty and value of turkeys and tell the fascinating story of turkey husbandry for the past 2,000 years. We hope to inspire you to join this unique conservation project, either by raising rare varieties or buying rare turkey products from breeders and farmers.”

The authors begin the first chapter with an excerpt from a letter written by Benjamin Franklin in which he expresses his thoughts on having the turkey as our national representative instead of the Bald Eagle. This is followed by the history of the turkey, which was native only to the Americas.

The second chapter takes us through the history of turkeys in agriculture and industry. This is where we learn how the genetic diversity has been slaughtered along with the Thanksgiving turkeys. A comparison of advertisements in *Turkey World* for the years 1930, 1941, 1971, and 1997 is enough to chill your blood.

Chapter three, “Turkey Genetic Diversity,” introduces us to the current status of the turkeys and tells about the census carried out by the ALBC in 1996 and 1997. The authors have included the results of the 1998 census by the Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities, which has a few conflicting numbers, but still reveals the dire situation with the turkey breeds. In addition to the numbers, there are details about the breeders. For example, of the 108 female Slate turkeys, half are owned by one hatchery.

The next chapter is the one that will fascinate the reader for years to come - the breed profiles. Feast your eyes on these beauties! Each breed has a section that provides its history, description, interesting tidbits, and current status. One section stands out from the rest as a heartbreaker, “Case Study: Sweetgrass Turkeys.” It illustrates what happens when production becomes too expensive due to marketing/processing problems.

I really like the color plate that places the various tail feathers side-by-side for easy comparison. But really, Dr. Sponenberg, do you think the average reader can learn genetics in one lesson? For those that are up to a challenge, Dr. Sponenberg (Professor of genetics and Pathology and one of my favorite authors) has included not only instruction in figuring turkey color genetics, but also a chart that gives you the genotypes – for ease

of ciphering. If anybody can teach you to figure color genetics in one lesson, it is this man.

The final chapters deal with “Conservation and Use of Turkey Diversity.” You will learn the five elements of conservation breeding, the breeding protocols, how they fit into modern agriculture, the need for exhibition, and the importance of research stocks. As you read the piece by Frank R. Reese of Good Shepherd Ranch, you will be moved. He blows away the stereotype of turkeys and explains that they are intelligent, fun, and can live productive lives for more than a decade. There are sections of contact information for hatcheries and places to get more information, including rare breeds organizations in Canada and England.

Christman and Hawes are accomplished writers who present technical information in a lively and interesting manner that is easy to understand. They keep your interest peaked and keep you pushing forward through the pages. They will stir your emotions. They will also show you that you can support the conservation of these breeds, even if you live in a tiny apartment in the middle of a large city.

As I stated in the beginning, this is *the* book to own about rare turkey breeds. I cannot recommend it highly enough. It is only available through the ALBC, but you can order it from their website, while learning more about their organization and other publications, at: www.albc-usa.org.

Carolyn J. Christman is a historian, anthropologist, and former high school teacher. She was the Program Coordinator for the ALBC from 1987 to 1999 and is the co-author of several books on rare livestock breeds, including A Rare Breeds Album and Taking Stock: The North American Livestock Census.

Robert O. Hawes is the Professor Emeritus of Animal, Veterinary, and Aquatic Sciences at the University of Maine. He has been widely published in the areas of Poultry Science and Aquaculture.

Alicia Karen Elkins did undergraduate studies in Agriculture with a minor in Forestry & Natural Resources Management and graduate studies in Creative Writing. She is the co-author of Ain't Goin' Huntin' Cause It's Cold Out There. Visit her website at: www.geocities.com/aliciakarenelkins

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