

Home before the holidays

At Springfield Farm in Sparks, turkeys roam free before turning up on the Thanksgiving table.

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The turkeys at Springfield Farm in Sparks roost occasionally in trees surrounding their grassy enclosure, or hop the low electrical fence and walk that edge of the wide world, sampling freedom. Something always brings them back, though. Perhaps it's the steady feed, or the domestic fowl's genetic pull toward home.

"I guess they kind of like it here," says David Smith, who owns the farm and raises free-range, pastured turkeys, chickens, pigs, cattle, sheep and other animals.

In the universe of turkeys bred for holiday tables, Smith's birds may be considered lottery winners. They cashed a good karmic ticket months ago, when they were poults weighing less than a decent turkey sandwich and their hatchery in Pennsylvania packed them in boxes and delivered them via priority mail into the hands of the Smith family.

For Thanksgiving and Christmas this year, the Smiths are raising nearly 300 turkeys all told, a hobbyist's pursuit compared to the country's largest turkey operations that might produce a few hundred thousand birds a year. Some people call those "factory farms."

Smith is no zealous animal advocate, nor should his family's natural pesticide-free farming be considered a political statement. He likes this approach for philosophical reasons, but it also makes practical sense, as these methods give Springfield Farm a niche

market at a time when food companies ranging from McDonald's to Whole Foods Markets have announced plans to improve their standards on animal treatment.



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David Smith

If animals are going to be raised for food, says Appleby, "that's the way they should be kept. That's ideal."

He's talking about the ample space, the outdoor life, the fact that the birds have clean ground - all of which makes these turkeys luckier than their counterparts on the high-production farm.

To visit the turkeys - Smith welcomes the public, just let the folks know you're there, he says - you cross Yeoho Road from the main house and walk up a grassy slope, past a small chicken house. Keep walking east a few score yards, toward the stands of locust, maple and wild-cherry trees.

Inside an electrical fence - it looks like a loose tennis net no more than a yard high - the turkeys spend their few months of life. About every week the birds are moved to new

In the rolling hills of Baltimore County, the combination of economics and animal welfare seems to be working.

You could ask the birds, and they might answer with any number of sounds. They seem at times to mimic geese or the peeping of bald eagles or the way laughter can suddenly erupt in a cluster of people at a cocktail party. Yes, they sort of gobble, but also bubble and gurgle and chirp.

Are these the sounds of happy turkeys?

It seems so, says Michael C. Appleby of the Humane Society of the United States. At Smith's invitation, Appleby led a group of Humane Society board members on a tour of Springfield Farm in September. They liked what they saw, says Appleby, who heads the society's division of farm animals and sustainable agriculture.

pasture, to keep them on fresh ground, but the setup remains the same.

Other than a few dozen of the youngest birds in a smaller fenced enclosure, most of the turkeys stay in the larger pen - three-quarters of an acre furnished with feed pans, fresh water troughs and four wood-frame huts that can be covered with plastic sheets in bad weather.

The birds occupy a small fraction of their field. The rest of the ground is open - for sprinting, strutting, ambling about. With their tails fanned, their beaks tucked in, their feathery mass aloft on spindly legs, the toms can move with a dignified bearing. They might be portly butlers. The hens are built along more slender, graceful lines, their heads bobbing and weaving as if they were prizefighters.



JOHN MAKELY : SUN STAFF PHOTOS
David Smith's turkeys spend their days sprinting, strutting and ambling about Springfield Farm. Now and then, a fight breaks out among the nearly 300 birds in the flock, but it never lasts very long.

'Heritage breeds'

Some in this crowd are your standard white variety that make up the vast majority of the

45 million turkeys that will appear on Thanksgiving tables this year. Others are reddish-brown or jet-black or dark-brown-and-black, or black-and-white-and-gray - these are the so-called "heritage breeds" that represent older varieties. The black-and-white-and-gray are Narragansetts, believed to be descendants of the turkeys the Pilgrims would have known.

They stand at a couple of arms' distance. They might come in closer, peck a bit at your pant leg or try to untie your shoelace.

"They're very curious," says Smith. Yes - curious. That suggests intelligence, not necessarily a word that tends to come up when talking about turkeys.

Just how smart are these birds? Hard to say. While there's quite a bit of research on wild-bird and domestic-chicken intelligence, not much scientific work has been done on domestic turkeys.

In his fourth year of raising the birds, Smith makes no claim to authority on avian cognition, but he's quick to dismiss the common notion that turkeys are deeply dumb. The birds respond to visitors and show some signs of personality.

Find Smith at various times of day in the enclosure, just watching the turkeys.

"I like to come out here and sit on a bucket with them," says Smith, 61, who retired as a lieutenant colonel after a 23-year career in the U.S. Army and as an electronic systems marketing guy after 15 years with Raytheon. "It's very therapeutic for me."

Nothing in Smith's matter-of-fact bearing and practical thinking suggests that he indulges sentiment or forms any attachment to the animals. It's apparent, however, that he likes the notion of their having a decent life here.

Of course, Smith's turkey visiting also has a practical dimension. In warm weather, it's sometimes necessary for Smith to break up a cluster of birds lest the ones in the center of the pack stay there too long and perish from collective body heat. And it's a good idea to keep an eye out for a sick or injured bird so it can be removed from the group.

Friendly as they might be to visitors, turkeys can be unkind to their own. Left in the flock, a wounded and bleeding bird would be at risk of being pecked to death, cannibalized by the others.

There's one downside to the natural approach, as Smith's birds have their beaks and toes intact. This would not be the case on a big commercial operation, where poults have their beaks trimmed and the tips of their toes cut off.

The practice is not considered humane, says Appleby, who says cutting off a turkey's beak is more like cutting the tip of a finger than a fingernail.

Animal advocates argue that turkeys and chickens will be inclined to wound or even kill each other under the overcrowded conditions of a high-production farm. Smith's experience seems to affirm that view, as the pecking becomes a problem only with a wounded bird.

Occasionally a fight breaks out in the flock, but it never lasts much longer than the average Major League Baseball brawl. A flutter of wings, a bit of jumping and squawking and that's that. You're more likely to see one bird racing after another through the crowd, but it's not clear if this is turkey rage or turkey games.

Birds start to stir

The games pass the day, which begins for these birds at first light. Come around 6 a.m., the sky turning pink behind the enclosure, the cluster of sleeping birds stirs. In minutes the birds are up, roaming about. Soon enough Smith's son-in-law, Douglas Lafferty, rolls up in a little motorized cart. Feeding time.

A 14-year Navy veteran, Lafferty and his wife, Valerie, decided four years ago they wanted a different life. They took Smith up on his offer to join him at Springfield Farm.

These 67 acres are what is left of land that's been in Smith's family for generations, perhaps as far back as the 17th century, Smith says. Nearing retirement and with elderly parents, Smith wanted to do something to prevent the land from being broken up or sold out of the family.

He arranged with his sisters to buy the land, did some research on small-scale farming and in 2000 opened for business, selling eggs and meat directly to drive-up customers and to restaurants.

The notion of raising free-range animals on organic pastures - meaning no pesticides are used on the fields - made sense for a direct-marketing business.

"To do that, you have to be unique," says Smith. "It's a niche market. If we were not doing this, we'd be like everybody else."

That cachet comes at a price for the consumer. Whole standard white turkey goes for \$2.75 a pound here, as compared with about a dollar a pound for a conventional turkey in a supermarket. The heritage turkeys sell at \$3.75 a pound.

Springfield Farm meets most of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's new organic labeling standards, except that not all the animal feed Smith buys has been raised organically. Otherwise, the animals here are given no antibiotics, nor growth hormones.

This year's poults arrived in four shipments from the hatcheries between May and August. They'll live between three and six months, growing to between about 12 and 45 pounds.

In the middle of this month, late on a Wednesday afternoon, the first load of 25 birds is herded aboard an 18-foot-by-6-foot-by-4-foot cage mounted on a trailer. There they spend the night with water, but no food.

The following morning before dawn, Smith drives the 80 minutes or so to the Eberly Poultry plant in Lancaster County, Pa., the largest organic-poultry operation in the country, where the turkeys are slaughtered.

Smith prefers to say "processed," but he can't say he brings any particular emotion to the occasion.

"It's really just another day because of the number of birds we deal with," says Smith.

There, the birds are unloaded and hung upside down on a slowly moving conveyor. Smith watches as an Eberly line worker stuns each bird unconscious with a hand-held electrical prod, then slits the throat, letting the bird bleed into a trough below. In about three minutes, the dead bird is immersed into a scalding bath, then de-feathered, then the head, feet, innards are removed. The turkey then is cooled down to about 40 degrees in ice water to avert bacteria growth.

For each bird, this all takes about seven minutes, rather slow by industry standards. The pace of the line, says company president Bob Eberly, assures that each bird is stunned first, and that no turkey goes into the scalding water alive. Animal activists say this sometimes happens in big poultry plants.

Smith says he helps and watches the Eberly crew because "I just come from the school that says I want to be involved. I want to know what's going on."

After helping to load the birds into ice-water tanks on the truck, Smith brings the turkeys back to Sparks and into the hands of his customers.

Curtis Eargle, chef at the Maryland Club, started buying heritage turkeys from Springfield last year and ordered some for Thanksgiving this year. The price runs more than three times what he'd pay a wholesaler.

"I just find the flavor just to be tremendous," says Eargle. "The moistness of the meat was incredible. It's a very forgiving bird. You can cook the heck out of it and it still comes out good."

The heritage birds have more dark meat than the conventional white turkey, about 50 percent to 50 percent dark to white, rather than, say, 30 to 70.

Eargle has visited the farm, seen the turkeys.

"I was walking around the pen with them," says Eargle. "It makes you feel good when

you eat it. You know they've lived a good life."

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