

A Good Turkey

By Megg Miller

Many judges place too much emphasis on colour – it is more desirable to concentrate on type, quality of fleshing and conformation.

What constitutes a good turkey? It's a question devotees of the breed are frequently asked and it's a subject many poultry judges ponder. Is the biggest bird the best or is it the one with beautifully coloured plumage?

Of course there will be differences between purebreds and commercial meat turkeys. Different outcomes will be expected from these disparate groups. A purebred is required to conform with stringent breed standards and as the purebreds are heritage breeds, then mobility and natural mating will be expected from them. Both these behaviours require longer, stronger legs than are needed on commercial birds. Other requirements are detailed below and make it easier to discern a good bird.

The commercial birds successfully meet their requirements for an economical, fast growing bird, such as an exaggerated broad breast, superior fleshing ability, excellent feed conversion, and shorter, well set apart legs. In England now the characteristics of this group are not permitted in purebred show turkeys.

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

Carriage and Symmetry

We're looking for a bird that is active and alert with the overall appearance being balanced and pleasing to the eye. This means no extreme features, including a very broad breast, a cut away front or a narrow gutted body.

During standing and walking the bird must appear symmetrical and balanced: shoulders should be carried high, movement be easy and free without signs of a forward tilt to the body.

Condition

Good health is reflected in the condition and sheen of plumage, the bloom on the facial skin, in the smooth shiny state of the leg scales and soundness of toes and footpads. It also is reflected in a well-fleshed body.

Weight

Specific weights are recommended in the *Australian Poultry Standards* for the different varieties so show birds should conform to the weight that reflects this. Undersized, underweight young birds are better not exhibited.

Head and Neck

A turkey's neck is long and the head broad and longish but not snipey or crowlike. Eyes are bold and bright, the beak strong and medium in length. The head and part of the neck are caruncled, and a thin dewlap sits under the lower mandible and down the neck. Absence of a snood in males should be a defect. Male turkeys have a black hairy beard growing on the breast and this may be present on females. While not a defect it is not highly desirable.

Body

All purebred turkeys have the same type and body structure, the only difference is the degree of width, depth and length of the body in regard to weight. E.g, breast width on a heavy variety like a Bronze or White could be expected to be greater than on a Bourbon Red.

Anticipate the body being wide and deep, the back slightly curved (an angle of about 35°) but not roached or humpy and sloping gently to the tail. Overall shape is rounded with well-sprung ribs and a full front.

Breast and Keel

The full breast is a characteristic of turkeys. It's well fleshed and rounded with the width consistent through the length of the keel. It's essential the keel is straight, long, smooth and runs parallel with the birds back. Knobs, indentations or a crooked keel are defects.

Tail, Wings, Shoulders

A turkeys tail is long and carried low, although the male will fan the tail when displaying. Wings are long, large and carried close and shoulders are wide, seamlessly merging into the neck.

Thighs, Legs, Toes

As befitting a meat bird, thighs are shortish and heavily fleshed and shanks short and strong. Feet must be sound or the bird will not be able to walk or mate naturally, and toes straight. All toenails to be present.

Colour

Plumage, eye, beak and leg and foot colour will vary with age and the colour variety. Colour only attracts 12 out of 100 in the scale of points and so plays a less important role to type and condition.

FURTHER READING

A handy reference is *Not Just For Christmas* by Janice Houghton-Wallace, which includes a section on showing.❖