Assuring the welfare of geese and turkeys this Christmas

What should vets look out for to ensure the welfare of these birds is not compromised?

Turkeys and geese are traditionally birds of Christmas. Whilst they may be the centrepiece of the holiday season for many, it’s important to consider the animal behind the dinner. Around 250,000 geese are raised for Christmas annually in the UK – a tiny number when compared to the millions of turkeys that are reared for slaughter (Gerrie, 2012). Both geese and turkeys are intelligent birds with complex social behaviours and specific husbandry requirements. It is important to be aware of their welfare needs to ensure you’re selecting from a supplier that provides excellent care (Figure 1).

Choosing a “higher-welfare” bird (ie one allowed to grow and mature naturally in comfortable, spacious conditions) ensures welfare on the farm has not been compromised (Compassion in World Farming, 2019).

Wild turkeys are intelligent, with individual personalities that stem from an overall inquisitive nature (Figure 2). These characteristics are inherited by their domestic cousins. Consequently, farmed birds need mental and physical stimulation to remain fit and healthy. Research shows that as space per bird is increased, aggression decreases (Buchwalder and Huber-Eicher, 2004) and on higher-welfare farms, the space to perch and extra room keeps birds in a more positive social environment. Heritage turkey breeds, such as the Bronze and Norfolk Black, are slow growers and farmers allow them to mature at a longer rate, reducing the changes of skeletal problems commonly seen in fast-growing, white turkeys. Consider checking with your supplier about the breed of turkey you’re purchasing and look for quality assurance marks, such as Golden Turkey run by the Traditional Farmfresh Turkey Association, that define good welfare conditions.

Turkeys are clean birds from a naturally clean environment. Many of the diseases prevalent in domestic flocks are caused by dirty, crowded conditions and poor air quality.

- Selection for accelerated growth rates
- Heavy breast muscle development and associated skeletal issues
- Joint and leg problems caused by faster growth and increased weight
- Artificial insemination and an inability to breed naturally in broad-breasted strains
- Pododermatitis (“bumblefoot”) caused by damp, unsanitary substrates
- High mortality rates of young birds due to external temperature fluctuations
- Boredom-related injuries (feather and vent picking) due to stocking density and a lack of enrichment

Welfare concerns for turkeys

Several authors review current welfare issues associated with commercially reared turkeys (Martrenchar, 2007; Glatz and Rodda, 2013), which include:

- High stocking densities
- Birds kept indoors with no outdoor access
- Artificial insemination and an inability to breed naturally in broad-breasted strains
- Pododermatitis (“bumblefoot”) caused by damp, unsanitary substrates
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Pests are vectors of disease into commercial flocks, meaning that pathogens spread quickly between birds living in close confinement. Histomoniasis, or blackhead, caused by the protozoa *Histomonas meleagridis*, has a very high morbidity and mortality rate in domestic turkeys, with 80 to 100 percent of birds in a flock succumbing to an outbreak (McDougald, 1998; McDougald, 2005). Histomoniasis can enter a flock through the eggs of a nematode worm and survives in the environment after being consumed by earthworms (McDougald, 2005). Blackhead can also be directly transmitted bird-to-bird by turkeys pecking at the cloaca of others. A high degree of sanitation, excellent biosecurity, quarantine procedures and clean ground to keep birds on is required to prevent entry of this deadly disease into a turkey flock (Liebhart and Hess, 2019). Use of enrichment, such as straw bales for perching, provides turkeys with a chance to explore more of their environment and thus reduces boredom that is associated with vent and feather pecking.

**Welfare concerns for geese**

In the UK, there are no goose-specific quality assurance schemes, so producers generally adhere to the welfare requirements stipulated in assurance schemes for domestic ducks (Clarke, 2015). The intelligence and flocking behaviour of geese make them one of the easiest domestic birds to work with, but their need for outdoor space with the ability to graze means they come with specific challenges. Farmed geese should have ad lib access to feed. Restricted access to grazing will cause undue stress resulting in abnormal behaviours and a poor quality of life. Grass grazing and a goose’s anatomy is an excellent evolutionary example of how a specific behaviour to collect a specific resource is so important to welfare.

Poor nutritional practice can result in disorders such as “angelwing” (Figure 3). A high-energy diet (specifically too much protein) causes the growth of flight feathers at a rate that is too fast for the skeletal system to keep up (Lin et al., 2012). Consequently these fast-growing feathers bend the new bones of the developing wing outwards and the goose ends up with primary feathers that protrude outwards from its body (Greenacre and Morishita, 2014). This condition, when adult, cannot be rectified and such feathers get damaged and soiled easily. In goslings, when wing slippage is first noticed, taping the growing wing to the body to keep the feathers in the right orientation and reducing food consumption can rectify the problem and revert growth to a normal rate. Avian veterinary surgeons should be able to provide help and advice if dealing with angelwing.

Domestic geese are wildfowl and therefore enjoy a swim. Basic requirements for farmed waterfowl (ie ducks) stipulate access to a container of bathing water that a bird can fully immerse its entire head in (Defra, 2019). Whilst geese are more terrestrial than ducks, water for swimming and bathing is something birds will readily use. A goose kept without bathing water will quickly develop poor feather condition. Regular washing, oiling and preening is essential for keeping their feathers water- and weather-proof.

“Wet feather” (Figure 4) occurs when plumage loses its shiny, water-proof properties and the feathers retain water like a sponge (Ashton, 2012). The goose can become cold and prone to infections and will avoid bathing – which makes the condition worse. Affected birds should be moved into warm, hygienic conditions and kept calm, whilst provided with clean, regularly changed, bathing water to encourage preening and oiling. Wet feather can rectify itself at the next moult. Observing wet feather in a flock of geese is a sign that birds are being kept in cramped conditions, on soiled ground, with limited access to bathing water.

A full reference list is available on request.