



TURKEY CLUB UK

Turkey Census - A Wake Up Call..

The Farm Animal Genetic Resources (FAnGR) Committee of the Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), has been working closely with the Poultry Club of Great Britain (PCGB) and Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) in order to establish a method for monitoring numbers of poultry in “Breeds At Risk” (BAR) in the UK.

Under current guidelines, a breed must submit annual census data on breed populations as one of the criteria for inclusion on the BAR register. This census data can then be used to monitor the breed populations over time.

Given the plight of the traditional varieties of turkey in the UK it is essential that we build a status on the BAR register as an essential and ongoing element of an effective strategy. It is important to understand that for the purposes of this census only turkey varieties as recognised in the latest 2018 PCGB Standards are required to be recorded.

As the recognised breed club Turkey Club UK (TCUK) undertook the census by canvassing all its members, and also took the opportunity to include a number of known turkey keepers and breeders who aren’t club members. During the course of the census project around 130 people were contacted and the attached table shows the aggregated data.

The census form was sent out by TCUK and initially went via email with a few going by post. Recipients were asked to return the completed form to TCUK for the data to be aggregated before submission. The initial return rate was disappointingly low.

To improve the volume of data so that a more credible census return could be submitted a campaign of follow up phone calls and emailing was undertaken, and this encouraged a significantly better response. I take this opportunity to thank both Carole Astbury and Hannah Moss who both gave up their time and patience to assist me in this.

Initial Observations

As can be seen from the table there are clearly some obvious concerns, and as has been voiced a number of times we are in very real danger of losing some of our varieties. However, whilst I am optimistic for example that there are actually more Blue or Narragansett turkeys than reported this cannot be guaranteed, and it is unlikely to be the position with White turkeys.

But even where there are seemingly a good number of turkeys and breeders within a variety such as the Crollwitzer all is not as it seems. For example, a general problem within Crollwitzers is that in recent years they seem to have lost their crisp marking and become smudgy. Other individual varieties are similarly drifting from their

agreed standard and subsequently a structured breeding program needs to be undertaken if the varieties as we know them are to be retained for future generations.

Variety	Older Hens >2019	Older Stags >2019	Young Hens <2019	Flocks
	Number to UK Standard of breeding females on 31/12/2019	Number to UK Standard of breeding males on 31/12/2019	Number to UK Standard of young females (< 1 year old) on 31/12/2019	Number to UK Standard of flocks on 31/12/2019
Blue	7	5	2	4
Bourbon Red	23	18	11	8
Bronze	28	14	18	6
Buff	23	11	0	5
Crollwitzer	58	27	5	11
Harvey Speckled	23	16	4	8
Nebraskan	0	0	0	0
Narragansett	12	6	10	8
Norfolk Black	35	16	10	9
Slate	14	11	18	5
White	3	3	0	2

A Wake Up Call

One thing that became apparent to me is the absolute passion by some turkey keepers to play with the standard varieties to see what colours they can create. Whilst I can see that this might be appealing this is undoubtedly undermining the already fragile and vulnerable bloodlines that exist.

Keepers are experiencing again this year birds hatching that do not relate to the parents that were purchased as pure breed. There has always been the capacity for an odd bird to pop up as it were, but this is becoming far more common than it should.

The key question here is where we go with this because we are on the edge of diluting what are already vulnerable bloodlines and irrevocably losing them forever for future generations.

It is a familiar message I conclude with. Traditional varieties of turkey were an important part of our rural heritage, and it is entrusted to us to ensure their unique gene pool is valued and sustained for future generations. Breed for a purpose, and undertake the necessary research to ensure the birds you are purchasing and breeding with have the necessary provenance.

If there is anyone reading this who has a traditional variety of turkey with what they believe to be an appropriate bloodline, and who didn’t contribute their data towards the census we would like to hear from you. Please contact TCUK on 01297 678393 or email me at ian@heritageturkeys.co.uk