



Industrial Turkeys



PSst! Who's that with the gorgeous snood? Why, that's Herschel! He's one of several toms, or male turkeys, that live at Tamerlaine. They were all rescued from an industrial turkey farm, aka factory farm.

When you visit Tamerlaine, you may begin to feel as if someone is *watching you*. Yeah. It's a turkey. And he's not just watching you, he's following you, albeit very, very slowly. What for, you ask? Well, love. He wants to strut and preen, fluff his feathers and wow you, strike his wings sharply on the ground and drag them. He wants to be told he's gorgeous, and to be pet. But not too much: if you're holding him, you can't really get a good look at all that beauty, and he'd much rather you did. Herschel loves greeting our visitors and is often the first one to do so. Turkeys are incredibly gregarious. Ours are allowed to wander freely through the barn and outside yard area each day. So, upon visiting, expect to be greeted

immediately by a curious turkey, eager to make a new friend—and to be admired, of course. And as you pet him...watch his head. Turkeys are born with mood jewelry: their heads change colors to indicate their moods!

Herschel is only one member of our flock. Shlomo and Norman are our two other toms. Each is allowed free access to a different area on different days—sometimes they get a bit jealous of each other, and we wouldn't want their (incredibly high) self-esteem damaged! Whichever bird greets you, you can be sure he will want to be your BFF right away.

We also have female turkeys Merci and Morti. They weren't rescued as early and as a result suffer from mobility issues. They aren't too mobile, so spend their days by the medical center, near the human caretakers they have come to love. Like all turkeys, ours have emotional intelligence: they learn quickly to recognize not only the birds in their own flock, but human faces as well. And while we joke about their friendliness, the fact is that family is very important to turkeys, and they don't do well without an established social group to love and share time with.

In the wild, baby turkeys stay with their mothers until they are about six months old. In fact, a flock is often made up of several female turkeys that join together to raise their chicks. So what happens to the baby boys? At about six months old, brothers will set out together to find their own way. They will stay together for life. Like females, they may also band together with other males to form larger, safer flocks. By day, turkeys use their beaks to forage for food. They can be heard scratching and constantly calling softly to each other, making sure no one strays too far. There is always at least one look out. Their keen eyesight means it's hard for a predator to sneak up on them. By night, they roost close together in high tree branches.



You may have noticed that Herschel is white—not like the colorful turkeys you’ve seen in the wild, nor like the hand drawings made by children each Thanksgiving. That’s because industrial turkeys have been bred to have white feathers. The reason is the first indication of just how brutal life for a turkey on a farm can be: when plucked, the pin feathers underneath white feathers are also white. And they didn’t leave a raised “spot” on the carcass. All of this adds up to make supermarket customers less likely to think about the fact that their food was once alive.



At a factory farm, turkeys may be crowded 15,000 to a shed. There is little room to move. The floors aren’t cleaned of filth, nor of sick or deceased birds. Photo credit: Jo-Anne McArthur/We Animals

And that’s not the only difference. Many people don’t think of wild turkeys as flying birds. But these little speed demons can actually fly up to 55 mph! However, industrial turkeys can no longer even fly. People want BIG turkeys. So, in addition to breeding white feathers, farmers have also bred them for size. In the time it takes a wild turkey to grow to 8 lbs. a domestic turkey reaches a whopping 28 lbs. Their wings couldn’t possibly carry such weight. Poor Herschel will never feel the freedom of flight.

But he wasn’t bred for health. A factory-farmed flock can expect up to about 20% mortality due to lameness and other issues associated with their

growth rate: their hearts can’t pump oxygen quickly enough. Their skeletons cannot support their weight. Their legs and hips spontaneously break, just from the effort to stand.

Herschel could have been one of these turkeys. 99% of turkeys in the USA come from factory farms. He would have hatched along with thousands of chicks crowding around a heater, rather than getting warmth from their mothers. Although family is so important to the social needs of a turkey, he would have none: these turkeys are crowded too deeply and too stressed to establish bonds. He would have been given about 3 square feet to move for his entire life, as would the thousands of turkeys around him. In the wild, turkeys travel about 500 acres of territory. They can remember and recognize their turkey friends they’ve not seen for two years. But factory farms don’t allow friendships to form in a confusing, unhealthy, and abusive environment.

Before his rescue, Herschel was victim to one normal practice for industrialized turkeys: his beak and claws were seared off without painkiller. This is because in such an unnatural and stressful environment as his, Herschel would have been more likely to be bullied and injured by other turkey—or done the bullying himself. In fact, turkeys often cannibalize each other, alive, in this environment. In the wild, aggression only happens to establish dominance or territory during mating.

Farmed turkeys cannot stand their own mass, so they often suffer skin burns from laying down, unable to move, in their own filth. In fact, in a test of turkey carcass samples found in the supermarket, 9 out of 10 tested were infected with *e. coli*. This is no doubt from laying on floors covered with urine, feces, blood, and decaying birds for months straight.

Seventy-nine percent of the samples in the supermarket were also infected with drug-resistant staph bacteria. Turkeys and chickens often suffer from a disease called “bumblefoot,” which is caused



when a cut on their foot is contaminated by the many bacteria on the hard floors where they live. These sheds are a haven for sickness.

Many turkey sheds are windowless; but even those with some aeration are filled with noxious fumes. In winter, vents are often closed and make the situation even worse. Healthy ammonia levels should be lower than 20 parts per million; in a turkey shed, they can be as high as 200 parts per million. It's incredibly painful to suck in air laden with a basic chemical. If he hadn't been rescued, Herschel would have suffered from lung disease, and eye and skin burns. He may have started hemorrhaging. He could have been poisoned to death.

Had he survived this house of horrors, he would have been loaded onto transport for a slaughterhouse. Most turkeys don't get to live any longer than 150 days. Turkeys are loaded at a rate of about 1500 *an hour*. You can imagine they aren't tenderly lifted. They are usually picked up by the legs and thrown into cages. There is no protection for them once they've started the transport. In 2020, one company alone—Butterfield—9500 turkeys died in trucks of heat exposure in August. In February of that same year, another 9,000 hens froze to death. Some were frozen onto the bars of their cages. The USDA does not intervene in transport conditions. Butterfield did not face charges of cruelty, because no laws were broken.

Why is this happening? Globally, in 2018, 656,309,000 turkeys were killed for slaughter. About 50 million of those are killed for one single day: Thanksgiving in the United States. The only reasons turkeys endure this is because there is a demand that must be met. You can change that.

If Herschel had been on that truck and managed to survive the journey, his destination would have been the slaughterhouse. By law, poultry don't have to be stunned before slaughter. However, most

slaughterhouses follow the same process: shackle turkeys by the feet to a conveyor belt; run their heads through a pool of electrified water to knock them out; continue moving on to a machine that slits their throats; then, into a vat of boiling chemicals



Factory-farmed turkeys leave the shed to endure even more torturous conditions. Photo credit: Jo-Anne McArthur/We Animals

that removes the feathers. Unfortunately, turkeys like Herschel are smart enough to make predictions based on the past. That means that while awaiting his turn, he'd see everything that happened to the turkey in front of him and know he was next. He might have jumped and missed the electrical bath. He might have missed the machine that slits a turkey's throat. If so, he'd have continued on to the last step, alive and conscious. This isn't uncommon.

Industrialized turkeys suffer from hatching until their death. In fact, they are born by pain: because of their ridiculous growth rate, these turkeys cannot even mate. Breeders get to live a bit longer before they, too, are killed for meat. But that doesn't make them lucky. They are artificially inseminated by humans over and over until they are too weak to lay more eggs. Then, they, too, are sent to slaughter.

The industry is a cruel and inhumane one. It depends on us to turn a blind eye to our own role in perpetuating the abuse and death of another sentient being—in fact, millions of sentient beings. One way they make it easy is by hiring the invisible to do the unimaginable. How many of us could kill a turkey? There may be some who claim they can. But very few would volunteer to take a job in a factory



At Tamerlaine we advocate for a vegan world, we must acknowledge that factory farming is devastating and needs to be stopped immediately as

farm or slaughterhouse. Instead, large conglomerations hire those who have barely more of a voice than the turkeys they kill. These people do the jobs we could not face day after day. Both farms and slaughterhouses are almost exclusively run in economically depressed areas, with those who have little choice of employment, and who are underrepresented in law. Many are “illegal”. Farmers and workers in slaughterhouses often suffer from a form of PTSD specific to them which results not from repeated trauma, but by *causing* repeated trauma. According to the Southern Law Poverty Center, workers here are paid below the poverty line, and yet they suffer “debilitating pain in their hands, gnarled fingers, chemical burns, and respiratory problems.” In other words, similar problems to the turkeys they slaughter. “Ag gag” laws prevent them from speaking out against injustices they see or suffer through and besides: many have no other option, or are afraid of deportation.

Four companies produce more than half of the turkeys in the United States, and their exploitation of human animals begins with family farms. Many farmers who have grown in a family of farmers will go into business with one of these giants, thinking themselves lucky to be on the verge of success. They will take out huge loans to build the sheds necessary to house the turkeys. But companies require specific quality standards, and if they aren’t met—per the company’s opinion—the farmer does not get the agreed upon price. The contract with the company may also allow them to specify the production method farmers use, which means farmers might need to upgrade equipment at a high cost to themselves to keep up. Suffice it to say, even as the amount of output on American farms increases, the actual number of farms has decreased significantly. Suicide is on the rise among farmers as they lose everything they had known.

the first step to removing animals from our food chain. It causes immense suffering in animals and humans with equal disregard. What it does to the environment shows an absolute hubris and flouting of laws. Each year, a single shed on a factory farm produces wastes of about 60,000 turkeys. Manure spills into local water sources are common and contain hormones and antibiotics and phosphorous in dangerous amounts. CAFOs also add to global warming. In fact, turkey factory farms contribute more carbon dioxide to the atmosphere than the entire country of Sweden!

There’s a simple solution to this. It’s not creating more laws, more oversight, more humane methods of killing. It’s even easier: stop eating turkey. With the drop of demand comes less need for factory farms. The natural deceleration of the industry will allow families to transition and learn new trades without the ground falling out beneath them. And it will save the lives of 650 million turkeys *yearly*.

At Tamerlaine, our turkeys live in sanctuary: safety, peace, and unconditional love, doing what comes naturally. Every animal deserves this. Your choices can help make this fate—or a factory farmed fate—possible.



Our founder, Gabrielle Stubbert, and her helpers—Morti and Merci—creating a “Thanksgiving” feast for osur turkeys and other animal friends.

