



The Trouble with Turkeys, Part 1

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Kelsey holds a cute turkey poult. After three years of raising our own broiler chickens for the table, we decided to make the big (and I mean big) leap to turkeys this year.

In truth, Brett, Kelsey and I had discussed raising turkeys – sort of – and then I made the split-second final decision upon seeing some Bourbon Red turkey poults at the feed store.

Knowing better, I still bought six on the spur of the moment without even setting up the brooder first (Warning: DO NOT do this!).

At least I had done some homework: reading turkey raising articles and talking to experienced raisers. I knew rearing turkeys would be different from bringing up ducks and chickens. I just didn't know that those innocent-looking little poults would be so much trouble...

Here's why:

1. Turkey poults are cute and personable. For me, this is not a good thing when I'm plotting to eat the animal later.

With our Cornish-cross broilers, we'd lucked out and managed to acquire them after their fluffy down mostly turned to white feathers. They all looked alike and never flaunted much personality (unlike our layer hens). Maybe they were too busy gorging themselves and lazing around. The poults acted totally different: energetic, inquisitive and responsive.

When we put our monstrous hands in the box, they gathered around pecking at rings and bracelets, letting us stroke their downy heads, peeping brightly the entire time. Now how can I eat something so adorable? (More on this next time.)

2. Turkey poults are delicate. The experts warned me that poults are more delicate than chicks, and require extra mothering. You need to show them how and where to eat/drink, make sure they don't get chilled or pile in corners, and keep their brooder immaculate so they don't get sick.

Even then, they cautioned, plan on losing some. Sure enough, despite 100 percent survival of past chicks (I know, I've been lucky) and diligent mothering, one poult soon died for unknown reasons.

3. Turkey poults peck. I had read that turkey poults liked to peck at shiny objects – one way you can get them to eat is to put marbles in their dish.

Still, I was completely unprepared for the frenzy of pecking they indulged in during their first few weeks with us. Pecking at my wedding ring and playing tug of war with my hemp bracelet was cute; pecking at their sibling's beaks and wing feathers: not so cute.

I'll share some more turkey troubles next time. I'd enjoy hearing about your turkey-raising experiences too!

~ Cherie

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