



CANADA'S OWN TURKEY BREED: STILL ON THE CRITICAL LIST

Yes, Canada has a turkey breed all its own – the Ridley strain of the Standard Bronze turkey. Today, the Ridley Bronze remains Canada's only surviving homegrown strain of heritage turkey, and their numbers are critically low and at dire risk of extinction.

The Ridley Bronze turkey was developed by John Richardson of Saltcoats, SK during the 1940's. He wanted a calm, hardy, meat turkey that was prolific and could reproduce naturally. He sought out the best stock available, crossed them together and created his ideal. While doing so, a turkey strain unique to Canada was born.

During the 1940's and '50's, the Ridley family became involved in farming this turkey strain as well. Maree Willis (nee Ridley) and her husband Fred established their own turkey farm also in Saltcoats, SK, followed by her brother George Ridley who developed his own turkey breeding farm in Leslie, SK. In the early '80s, the University of SK obtained turkey stock from George Ridley for study and breeding. It was at this time that this turkey variety garnered the name "Ridley Bronze" by way of the university. By 1981 the Ridley families were no longer turkey farming and had dispersed all of their turkeys, so the Ridley Bronze turkey remained solely in the hands of the university as well as a handful of private breeders. In 2008, budgetary constraints resulted in the closure of the University of SK program and their flock dispersed to private breeders across Canada. This dispersal went poorly with the result being that they all but disappeared.

As of 2015, three separate Ridley Bronze turkey surveys have been conducted Canada-wide. In 2010 there were only 90 breeding females located. In 2012, the numbers improved slightly with 225 breeding

females and 50 breeders involved. The most recent survey done in March 2015, showed little improvement with only 250 breeding females counted, and the number of individuals actively breeding having dropped to 30.

This is very disappointing news indeed. The hope was that with this most recent survey, numbers would have increased from previous “critical” levels as more small farmers discovered the virtues of the Ridley, which include a calm gentle temperament, personable natures, good foraging ability, a hardy constitution, and the ability to reproduce and rear their young naturally. “It is both a mystery and a disappointment that numbers have not increased”, notes Margaret Thomson, a heritage livestock breeder from BC who headed up the western Canadian portion of the census.

This turkey strain is an important part of Canada's farming history. For those who already have Ridleys, it is imperative that they be cognizant of their rarity and urgent need for preservation, and in doing so, making every effort to maximize each hen’s production. It is also critical that more breeders come forward to raise and market these versatile and very personable birds, or else they will be lost forever. It would be tragic to have them end up as just a brief note in the history books.

Resources:

Ridley Bronze Yahoo group: <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/RidleyBronzeTurkey/info>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/RidleyBronze?ref=bookmarks>

Website: <https://ridleybronzeturkey.wordpress.com/>

Rare Breeds Canada: rbc@rarebreedscanada.org

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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