



How Did Turkeys Come to the United States?

(adapted from Newsela - <https://newsela.com/read/turkey-immigrant-thanksgiving/id/24262/>)

People in the United States traditionally eat turkey on Thanksgiving. Tables across the nation will be full of turkey. While this bird is connected to a very American holiday, it is not actually native to America. Instead, it is American in a way many people don't suspect. The ancestors of the turkeys we eat on Thanksgiving came here from another country. The turkeys we eat now are originally from Mexico. From there, they were taken back to Europe by explorers. Pilgrims brought the turkeys to the east coast of what is now the United States when they came from Europe later on. Studies have pinpointed the ancestor of the turkeys we eat today. It is a South Mexican wild turkey. There is evidence that suggests that this animal was being traded and raised by humans as early as 2,300 years ago.

These turkeys might not have been used for food at first. Instead, turkeys were limited to the elites. They were probably used for religious and cultural events like ceremonies. This changed by the time the Spanish arrived in the Americas in the 1400s. At that point, the birds were being eaten frequently by both humans and animals. The Spanish liked what they saw. They also presumably enjoyed what they tasted. The first turkeys were shipped to Europe sometime around the year 1500, where they were a huge success. The famous Thanksgiving feast in Plymouth, Massachusetts, took place in 1621. By this time, turkeys had been in Europe for more than a century. When Europeans came to the Americas, they tried to recreate their lifestyle. This even involved bringing the animals they had on their farms in Europe, including turkeys. So, these birds that were originally from Mexico were brought back to North America. The turkeys that we eat today are descended from these turkeys that were brought from Europe.