

Let's talk turkey



Jim and Pat Peach raise hundreds of turkeys at Cowichan Valley Farms.

Krista Siefken

By [Krista Siefken - Cowichan News Leader Pictorial](#)

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We're told not to play with our food before we eat it, but turkeys make that childhood rule difficult to follow.

The free-range turkeys at Cowichan Valley Farms, for example, have made a habit of following their caretakers in packs, always on the lookout for their next diversion.

They'll investigate rings on unsuspecting hands, and will assist — albeit poorly — in the hammering of nails.

“They're curious,” says Pat Peach, who owns Cowichan Valley Farms with her husband, Jim. “Chickens are grumpy, but turkeys are fun.”

The Peach family farm boasts more than 500 turkeys, of both the heritage and traditional variety.

About half will end up on island tables this weekend as families settle in for Thanksgiving feasts, and the rest will meet their maker come Christmas.

Speaking amid the squawks and gobbles of the surrounding birds — who press in closer and closer the longer one stands still — farmers Peach and Peach happily recount their experience raising the funny fowl.

“You can’t herd them from behind — you run and make an idiot of yourself, and they’ll follow,” says Pat Peach. “They’ll go wherever you go.”

“Jiggle your keys,” adds Jim Peach, “and they’ll come.”

Strutting between a cluster of female turkeys with his feathers fanned out is a dark male — named Gustopher — who clearly doesn’t appreciate the attention his ladies are receiving.

“If you gobble at him, he’ll gobble right back at you,” Jim Peach says of the two-year-old breeder.

Sure enough, the human gobble is answered by the turkey.

Nearby, a lone turkey examines his reflection in a shiny car door, and farther back on the property another group of white turkeys begins running wildly — for no apparent reason.

“One of them will find something, a piece of tape maybe, and pick it up,” says Jim Peach. “Next thing you see that one darting down the field and 200 turkeys chasing him because they want a piece of it, too.”

The Peaches promise turkeys are gentle — contrary to popular opinion — but admit there’s one stereotype that holds true. Bird brain.

“They’re very dumb,” Pat Peach concedes.

Which can make raising free-range turkeys a challenge.

“We’ve learned some things the hard way,” says Pat Peach. “When the chicks are little, you can’t even have a bucket of water left outside, because they’ll drown.”

Lights and a radio — playing AM talk shows and the Vancouver traffic report — keep away raccoons, but there are other predators to watch for.

“We got all these little poults (turkey chicks) just a couple of weeks old, and it was a beautiful sunny day so I thought I’d let them out of the barn, and let them run around,” added Jim Peach of the chicks kept indoors until they are about one month old.

“Well, our neighbour phones and says, ‘Jim, there are a lot of eagles in your backyard

right now.’ It was like a buffet for them — they were just picking them off.”

But the majority of turkeys made it to adulthood, and now they face their final destination: the family table.

“This is just a hobby for us,” sums Jim. “But it’s nice — you realize you grow a good bird, and a family sits down together to eat it.”

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