A bald eagle, as the nation's official bird, adorns the Great Seal of the United States of America. But if Benjamin Franklin had had his way, a turkey, not a bald eagle, might have famously gripped those 13 arrows and an olive branch as part of the seal. Franklin knew, like others who have spent time around this large bird, that it would have been an honor for the turkey to represent the United States.

Originating from the Mexican wild turkey, the turkey was domesticated by Native Americans in prehistoric times and introduced to Europe by Spanish explorers in the 1500s. Early American settlers brought descendants of the Mexican wild turkey into the United States, and eventually crossed them with another subspecies of wild turkey indigenous to eastern North America to produce the forerunner of the modern domestic turkey (Meleagris gallopavo).

Turkeys are usually characterized by large tail feathers that spread into a fan when they are courting or alarmed. Turkeys also have several oddly named appendages: the caruncle, snood, wattle, and beard. A caruncle is a red fleshy growth on the head and upper neck of the turkey, a snood is the red fleshy growth from the base of the beak which hangs over the side of the beak, and a wattle is the red, loose appendage at the turkey's neck. A beard is the black lock of hairy feathers found on a male turkey's chest.

**COMMERCIAL TURKEYS:**
The American Poultry Association recognizes eight breeds of turkeys—Bronze, Narragansett, White Holland, Black, Slate, Bourbon Red, Beltsville Small White, and Royal Palm. The most commonly raised commercial turkey today is the Broad-Breasted White variety, which has all-white plumage and descends from the White Holland. The brown-colored Bronze turkey used to be the bird of choice, but turkey producers found that white pin feathers left less discoloration in the meat than brown ones.

Some small farmers are trying to bring back "heritage breeds"—turkeys that originated in North America—by raising breeds other than the Broad-Breasted White. Certain breeds are listed as "critical" by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy: those having fewer than 500 breeding birds in North America, with five or fewer primary breeding flocks. These include Beltsville Small White, Black, Jersey Buff, Narragansett, Slate, Bronze, White Holland, and White Midget. Royal Palm is listed as "rare," with fewer than 1,000 breeding birds in North America, and seven or fewer primary breeding flocks.

Most turkeys raised for food have been genetically selected to have large breast meat, and they are unable to fly or reproduce without artificial insemination. They are fed a mix of corn and soybeans during their short life. Over 260 million turkeys are slaughtered for food each year in the United States, most at about 14–18 weeks of age. Commercial, domestic hens (or female turkeys) weigh 15–18 pounds by 14–16 weeks of age, and heavy toms (or male turkeys) weigh 25-32 pounds by 16–18 weeks.
WILD TURKEYS:
Five subspecies of wild turkeys still inhabit much of the United States, with a population estimated at 6.5 million. The most prevalent bird is the Eastern wild turkey (Meleagris gallopavo silvestris), whose forest territory ranges from Maine to parts of Kansas and Oklahoma. Wild turkeys are smaller in size than their domestic counterparts, with a longer neck and body. They have a rich, brown-shaded plumage with a metallic or iridescent sheen, and white and black bars on their primary wing feathers. Toms can stand up to 4 feet tall and weigh more than 20 pounds, while hens are about half that size and weight. Wild turkeys eat nuts, greens, insects, seeds, and fruit, and can live 3–4 years. Their predators include human hunters and animals who disturb their nests, such as crows, raccoons, skunks, snakes, and opossums.

Hens begin nesting in late March or early April, laying one egg a day until the clutch reaches 10–12 eggs. They nest on the ground, in a hidden area in the forest or fields of tall grass. Incubation lasts for 28 days, and hatching occurs over a 24–36 hour period in late May or early June. Poults, or baby turkeys, stay near the nest until they are about 4 weeks old and can fly 25–50 feet. This allows them to escape predators by roosting in trees for the night, usually near their mother.

By three months of age, turkey groups will begin to form a social hierarchy, and an established pecking order is set by five months of age, at which time groups show subdivision by gender. As full-grown adults, wild turkeys can fly at 55 miles per hour and run at 25 miles per hour.

Hens are protective of their young. They will hiss and ruffle their feathers to scare away trespassers, and will only abandon the nest as a last option. Hatching begins with pipping, where the poult rotates inside the egg, breaking the shell in a circular pattern with its egg tooth (a sharp spike on its beak). Hens cluck as they check the eggs, beginning the critical imprinting process. Social cohesion among the poults is evident the first day after hatching, as is attachment to the hen. Vocal and visual signals are used to maintain close contact. This facilitates the learning of certain important activities, particularly feeding. Turkeys are social animals who prefer to live and feed together in flocks.

PROTECTIONS OR LACK THEREOF:
Like most species hunted for sport or food, wild turkeys are not protected by legislation. Likewise, commercial turkeys are not even included in the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, although poultry make up over 95% of the animals killed for food in America. They are raised in crowded factory farms where they are not able to nest or feed like their wild cousins.

FACTORY FARMING:
Life on “Old MacDonald’s Farm” isn’t what it used to be. The green pastures and idyllic barnyard scenes portrayed in children's books are quickly being replaced by windowless metal sheds, wire cages, “iron maidens,” and other confinement systems integral to what is now known as “factory farming.”

Simply put, the factory farming system of modern agriculture strives to produce the most meat, milk, and eggs as quickly and cheaply as possible, and in the smallest amount of space possible. Cows, calves, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, rabbits, and other animals are kept in small cages or stalls, often unable to turn around. They are deprived of exercise so that all of their bodies' energy goes toward producing flesh, eggs, or milk for human consumption. They are fed growth hormones to fatten them faster and are genetically altered to grow larger or to produce more milk or eggs than nature originally intended.

Because crowding creates a prime atmosphere for disease, animals on factory farms are fed and sprayed with huge amounts of pesticides and antibiotics, which remain in their bodies and are passed on to the people who eat them, creating serious human health hazards.

Factory farming is an extremely cruel method of raising animals, but its profitability makes it popular. One way to stop the abuses of factory farming is to support legislation that abolishes battery cages, veal crates, and intensive-confinement systems. Shop locally at small farms that use more humane methods. The best way to save animals from the misery of factory farming is to stop or reduce your consumption of meat, milk, and eggs.