

It's important for many people to know where their food comes from. This Thursday, millions of families will dine on turkey, seasonal fruits and vegetables, and prepare favorite recipes or test new ones. Most families will roast a turkey, but some will take extra care to learn more about how it's raised before it goes into the oven. As people continue to scrutinize how food is packaged, handled and prepared, many are taking a different approach to their main entree by learning more about it or monitoring the success of a roost in the wild. Untamed, but well-tracked

Talk to some hunters – they might tell you there's more than just the thrill of adventure that fuels the pursuit of wild turkey. Many, including Jack Morris, a Tulsa resident and longtime hunting guide, call themselves land conservationists. They not only hunt the wildlife that graze or roost on their land, but they also monitor them closely to make sure they don't lose any integral animals to over-hunting. Morris learned to hunt from his father when he was about 5. He shot his first wild turkey when he was 7. And he's been doing it ever since.

“Hunting turkey isn't like hunting deer, where you have a group of hunters together in a blind,” he said. “For hunting turkey, you might have three guys go out together, but split up and go out alone.” Wild turkeys are thought to be one of the hardest animals to hunt. They're designed to survive in the wilderness, unlike their farmed relatives that need constant attention as they grow. Wild turkeys roost high in trees; they can run at speeds as fast as 45 mph; they can hear something about a mile away; and they have a 270-degree peripheral.

It takes a lot of patience and research on the part of the conservationist.

Morris hunts various tracts of land for water fowl, deer, turkey or random hogs that might pass through. He leases and owns nearly 20,000 acres in Oklahoma and Kansas. Spread throughout the land, feeders are hung from trees with cameras aimed to monitor what's living on or visiting his property. During one of his recent returns

to his lease near Hominy, he found about 70 turkeys roosting near a creek, another 60 on his ranch and about 1,000 in Kansas. About 15 years ago, the wild turkeys on his Oklahoma property suffered from a disease that nearly wiped out the population. It used to be prolific, he said. Now he must monitor the birds and make sure that he leaves enough young birds to breed for the next generation of turkeys. "These are my babies," said Morris as he drove around his Hominy property in search of a turkey. Morris wakes up before the sun peeks beyond the horizon to get dressed in warm layers. He's also wearing camouflage from head to toe that will help him blend in with the native tall grass and trees changing into their own fall wardrobe. Morris gets started at the QuikTrip near his house in the middle of town, where he grabs a coffee and a few snacks before hopping into his King Ranch Ford truck. He does a quick inventory of the back of his truck, and then he's off to spend the morning looking for his Thanksgiving entree. Silence is a big factor of hunting "and one that often determines a successful trip. It also helps if you know the sounds they make and the calls they make when they're chatting in the roost. "These birds are fast. You've got to sit still for a long time, otherwise they'll hear you," Morris said. Some days it's not so easy to hunt a wild turkey. Mother Nature might have other plans for the Thanksgiving feast and send a few coyotes to scare the roost into hiding all day. He's always sure not to scare them out of their roost, because they might never return if it's disturbed. Sometimes the weather might be too wet or too windy to go out for a hunt; it might take a time or two. But Morris's Thanksgiving meals always include a wild turkey "and a store-bought turkey when more family is in town. "Not everyone likes the taste of wild turkey," he said. "Its skin is thick and tough, so you have to skin

it before you cook it.”

• Farm to table Chris and Celeste McBride have bought turkeys raised on Greenwood Farms for the last few years. When they made the transition to buying their meat from a local producer, they met Gary Greenwood through Tulsa Farmers Market. “We like that we know who they are. It’s a real farm-to-table experience,” said Celeste McBride. During the Cherry Street Market season, the couple buys meat from the Big Cabin farmer every weekend. When the market reduces to every other week, they plan ahead. Last year, they ordered a smoked turkey from Greenwood. And the year before that, it was a regular turkey. “I like to support our local farmers,” said Judy Allen, a frequent Greenwood Farms customer. “I also like knowing how it was raised and that they take care of their animals.” She buys fresh eggs from them every weekend they’re set up, and she’s bought a turkey from them for the past few years. When it comes to the turkey, she said it’s important to know where it’s coming from beyond a grocery store. McBride feels the same way. “I’d rather come to the farmers market and buy it right from the farmer,” she said. But it’s not as simple as it sounds. The turkey the McBrides and Allen prepare for their special holiday meals isn’t treated the same as one of the frozen birds dropped into a freezer case at the local grocer. The heritage turkeys are free to roam from here to there on the few hundred acres he owns and leases for his farm. “They wander wherever they want,” said 62-year-old Greenwood. “They end up in the neighbor’s yard, across the street and then down the street, too.” But the hens never wandered too far from the blue-and-white home where he and his wife, Cindy, live with their four dogs. Since the middle of August, only five hens and a lone Tom roam the farm. When the young turkeys “originally 140 poults” were still alive, it meant making sure they all had enough clean water and fresh feed to eat. Before they get a chance to roam around the farm, he

said theyâ€™re kept in a coop where they can be watched until they are strong enough to fend for themselves. Eventually, the poults mature and they can find food, grass, vegetation and insects on their own. It doesnâ€™t take long for his heritage turkeys to mature. They live on Greenwood Farms for less than a year before they reach their proper weight. As they grow, Greenwood makes mental notes on each of the birds. He moves them under shelter when it rains, and when he thinks that theyâ€™re ready, heâ€™ll prepare them for processing. â€œThe size of the turkey dictates when you process your turkeys,â€• he said. â€œNo one will buy a 40-pound turkey.â€• When his turkeys hit the 20 to 30 pound range, he made the call. In years past, Greenwood would process the turkeys by hand, from killing them to de-feathering to freezing. But this year, 60 of the turkeys were corralled and taken to Van Buren, Arkansas, where there is a United States Department of Agriculture certified processing plant that takes the birds and processes them within the span of a day. To recoup his costs for processing and other factors that go into the raising his heritage turkeys year after year, he sets a \$6 per pound price tag. When he goes the route of processing his turkeys through a USDA plant, he can also sell directly to restaurants and chefs, and sell his turkeys without taking orders or deposits beforehand. Greenwood said his remaining turkeys will roam around the farm freely until they find their respective places in the spring. The Jennys will later find a tree or a bush that suits their needs and stay there until the next generation of poults are hatched. They will stand guard to protect their young ones, just like Greenwood watched the poults. Thatâ€™s been the process for the past eight years for the heritage turkeys that eventually make their way to area dining tables. â€œTheyâ€™ll lay eggs in late March to early April,â€• Greenwood said. â€œAnd weâ€™ll buy the rest of our turkeys and raise them.â€• People should know where their food comes from, he said. On his farm, they donâ€™t

use any antibiotics or medicine for any of their livestock â€” laying hens, ducks,  
dairy and beef cattle, hogs and turkeys. â€œThey want it as natural as  
we can get them,â€• he said. â€œWe try to take care of our customers  
and give them what they want.â€• Jessica Rodrigo 918-581-8482 [jessica.rodrigo@tulsaworld.com](mailto:jessica.rodrigo@tulsaworld.com)