

# DOMESTICATED BIRDS OF PRE-HISPANIC MEXICO

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**D**omesticating animals and plants has distinguished the human species since ancient times. It is difficult to calculate its benefits and drawbacks, but this achievement undoubtedly demonstrates how humanity has made use of its ability to reason to overcome the limitations imposed by the environment.

Domestication was common in most civilizations, although its specific characteristics varied by region. The pre-Hispanic civilizations of Mexico and the southern United States focused mostly on domesticating birds, both for food and religious purposes.

Research based on remains found in archeological excavations and historical sources from the sixteenth century has made it possible to compose an important list of 14 species of domesticated birds from pre-Hispanic times.

Undoubtedly, the *guajolote* or turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is the most significant. Some archeozoological studies from the Mexico Basin indicate it was already domesticated 3,500 years ago, suggesting the domestication process may have concluded more than 4,000 years ago in central or western Mexico.

The turkey, called *uexolotl* by the Nahuas, *damolni* by the Otomís and *cax, a'cach* or *ulum* by the Mayas,

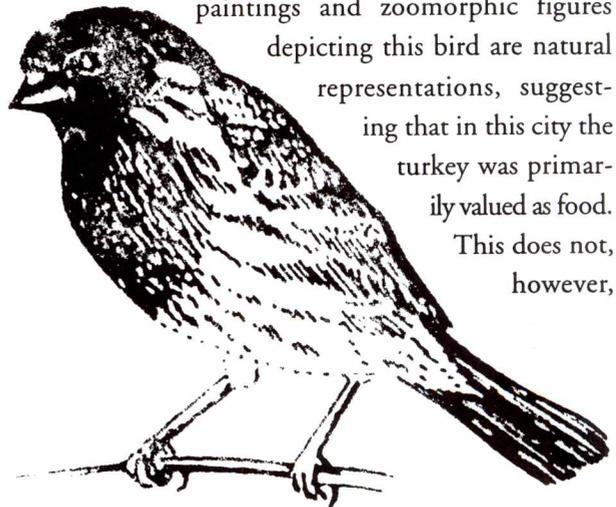
was an important source of meat and eggs. It is not surprising, therefore, that all agricultural communities made extensive use of it.

The turkey is the bird most frequently mentioned in archeological records. Archeozoological studies indicate it was an important animal in the Mexico Basin, especially during the Formative Period (6000 to 1700 B.C.). Specimens are commonly found associated with burials and offerings.

The arrival of the Classic Period (A.D. 200 to 800) brought a change in how this species was used, at least in some areas. Teotihuacan has almost no remains of turkeys associated with religious activities, though they are commonly found linked to providing food. The

paintings and zoomorphic figures depicting this bird are natural representations, suggesting that in this city the turkey was primarily valued as food.

This does not, however,



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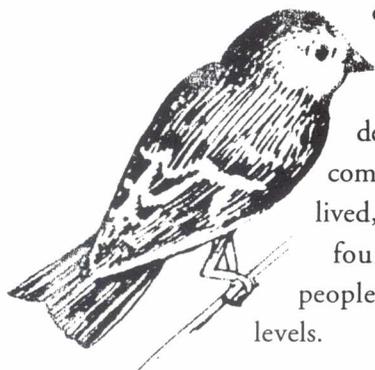


Turkeys. Florentine Codex, Book XI (Friar Bernardino de Sahagún).

diminish its cultural importance. After all, it was one of the main sources of meat for the people of Teotihuacan. Rather, its use seems to have changed because of the emergence of new norms. For example, it is nearly certain that some individuals spent their time raising turkeys and selling the products derived from this bird. This implies that they were not accessible to everyone,

but their acquisition depended

on purchasing power. The proof of this lies in animal remains found in residential areas: turkey bones are commonly found where the elite lived, while few such remains are found in areas inhabited by people from lower socioeconomic levels.



Aztec and Otomí sources mention the turkey as an important part of myths and certain ceremonies. Some legends about the creation of the world mention a previous era in which humanity existed, but a cosmogonic sun caused a torrent of fire that killed everyone except a few who were transformed into turkeys.



In the Otomí calendar this bird symbolizes the sixteenth day of each month. In festivals throughout the year, turkeys were sacrificed: they were beheaded and their blood spilled over a fire. The turkey was also a symbol of rain and of the sun, the counterparts of fire and the eagle.

The peoples of central Mexico had a custom of beheading a turkey in front of a home to inaugurate it, sprinkling its blood in the four corners, on the roof and on both sides of the door. Then, they plucked and cooked the turkey, ate part of it and offered the rest to the god of fire. Another tradition consisted of sacrificing a turkey when a lime-processing oven was finished or when it was lit for the first time.

Another group of birds domesticated were parakeets and macaws. There is sufficient evidence to confirm that at least 1,000 years ago, several of these species were already common members of many households.

First, we have the *guacamaya roja* or scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*). The best evidence of its domestication comes from studies conducted in Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, where many bone remains of different ages were found. Also found were *periqueras* or nests carved out of adobe blocks designed for the macaws to live in and reproduce in captivity. This species was not used for food, but in religious activities, in sacrifices and for feathers to make ceremonial adornments and head-dresses.

The scarlet macaw was the symbol of the sun and of fire, comparable to the morning star, and was included in many myths. For the Mexicas, this bird embodied *Xiuhotecutli*, the sun, fire and the god of turquoise. It was also linked with *Arara*, the master of fire, the god of wealth, the judge and king.



In addition, different types of parakeets were also domesticated. Some examples were the *toznene* or yellow-headed parrot, the *cocho* or white-fronted parrot and the *quilton* or orange-fronted parakeet. These birds were known for eating whatever they were fed, learning words and being good company. It was believed that parakeets were companions of the goddess *Citlalinicue* and of travelers, as well as rulers of the thirteenth day in the *Tonalpohualli*.

Songbirds were held in great esteem by pre-Hispanic peoples who said their songs invited the rain, and that they were companions of the sun. They also believed the songbirds personified princes and warriors who had died in combat and were brought back to life in the form of beautiful colored birds that sang pleasantly.

The different sounds made by these birds were interpreted as omens of good or evil, so they were frequently used in the art of foretelling the future. If the songbirds warbled, it was cause for delight or rejoicing. But if they squawked or screeched, it was a sign that a death, illness or serious problem was about to take place. The *cuitlachochoin* or curve billed thrasher, the *centzon-tlatole*, or common mockingbird, the *nochtototl*, or house finch, and the *quatotzli*, or song sparrow, were all highly valued for their songs.

It was therefore common for people to raise these birds in cages. They caught them using traps made of rope, blunt-tipped arrows, or nets and then transported them in reed cages to their homes or to sell at the markets. Some species, like the *centzontle* or common mockingbird (*Minus Polyglotoos*) sparked enormous interest, not only because it could imitate human voices, other birds and even dogs, but because it was also said to have the most melodious song.

The colored feathers also played a special role in the domestication of these birds. For example, the *xiuhtototl*, known as the lovely cotinga, was

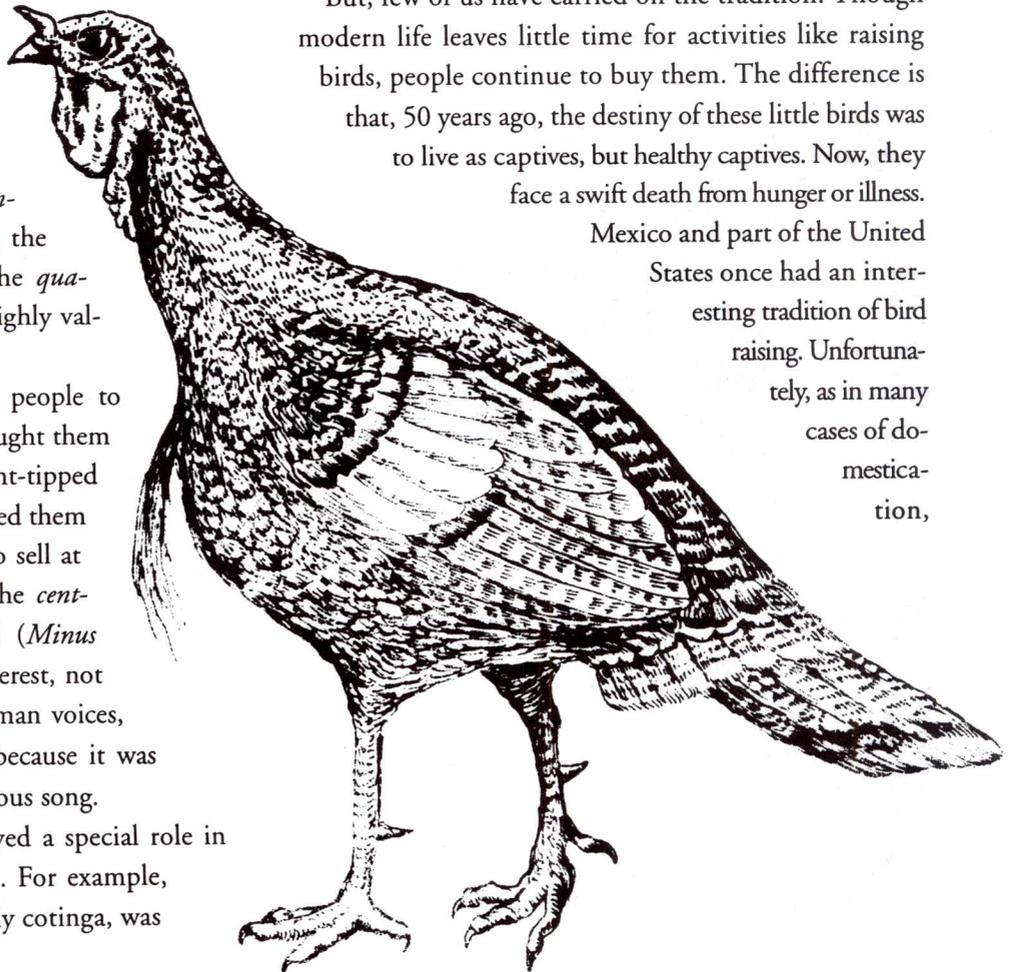
raised in cages and its plumes used for making head-dresses and to adorn chaplets or wreaths worn on the head, ceremonial robes and shields. Other domesticated species used in this way were the *acolchichi*, or red-winged blackbird, the *coztototl*, or dark-backed goldfinch, and the *hoauhtototl*, or painted bunting.

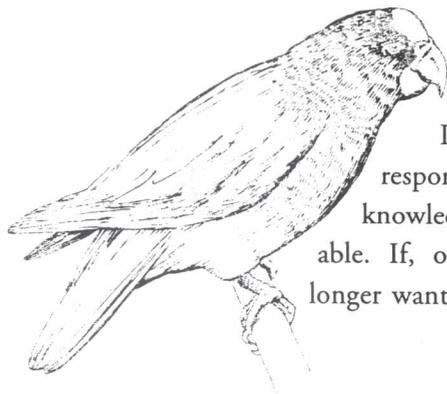
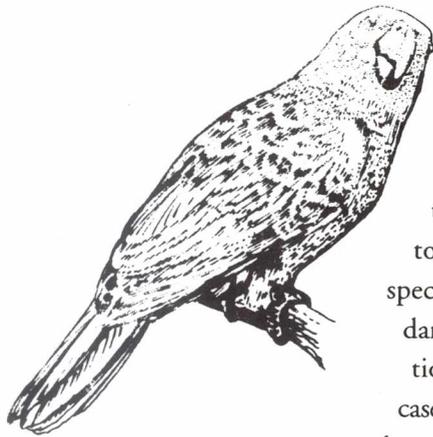
What remains of these traditions? Very little. The turkey continues to be an important source of meat, but for today's poultry industry, it is simply one more piece of a technological complex which takes little interest in its history and contribution to human civilization.

The capture and sale of macaws, parakeets and songbirds is a deep-rooted practice in North America. Many people still take a special liking to their sweet, melodious trill or to the mischievousness of a parrot. As children, all of us surely knew and admired at least one older woman who raised birds, knew how to feed them, how to take care of them and what to do so they would reproduce.

But, few of us have carried on the tradition. Though modern life leaves little time for activities like raising birds, people continue to buy them. The difference is that, 50 years ago, the destiny of these little birds was to live as captives, but healthy captives. Now, they face a swift death from hunger or illness.

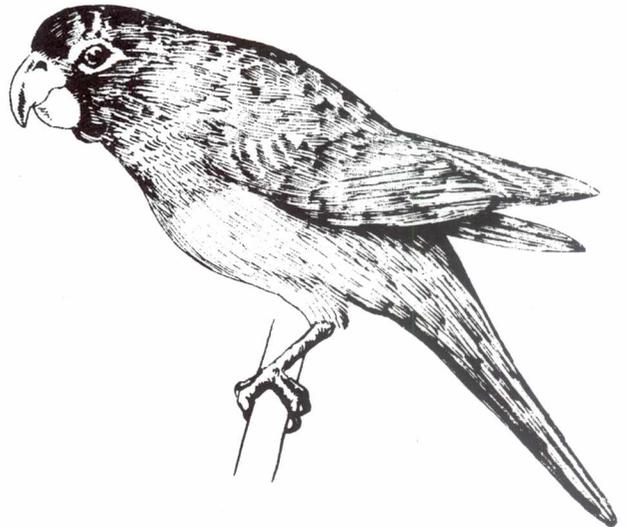
Mexico and part of the United States once had an interesting tradition of bird raising. Unfortunately, as in many cases of domestication,





the wild ancestors of these species are now in danger of extinction. This is the case of the turkey, the scarlet macaw, and a number of species of parakeets. So, if we want to preserve the tradition of raising birds, I think we should, but responsibly, based on all the knowledge and experience available. If, on the contrary, we no longer want to raise birds or do not

have appropriate conditions to do so, we should not buy them and avoid condemning them (because of our limited sense of morality) to certain death. **W**



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## DOMESTICATED BIRDS IN PRE-HISPANIC TIMES

*Psittaciformes*

*Guacamaya roja*  
or scarlet macaw. It was used in sacrifices and for its feathers.

*Parakeets*

*accompanied travelers and were common in many homes*



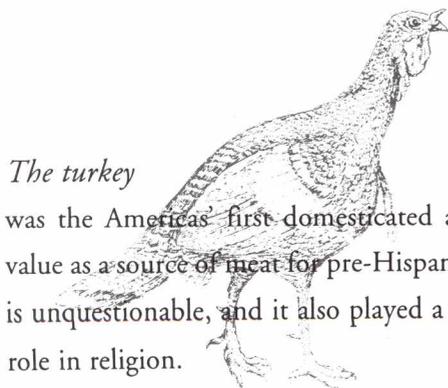
*Loro coroniamarillo*  
or yellow-headed parrot.



*Loro frentiblanco*  
or white-fronted parrot.



*Periquillo*  
or orange-fronted parakeet.



*The turkey*  
was the Americas' first domesticated animal. Its value as a source of meat for pre-Hispanic cultures is unquestionable, and it also played a significant role in religion.

*Songbirds*

*Songbirds raised for their trills and squawks used for divining*



*Centzontle*  
or common mockingbird.



*Cuitlacoche*  
or curve billed thrasher.



*Gorrión mexicano*  
or house finch.



*Gorrión de canto*  
or song sparrow.

*Songbirds domesticated to use their feathers for ritual vestments*



*Tordo capitán*  
or red-winged blackbird.



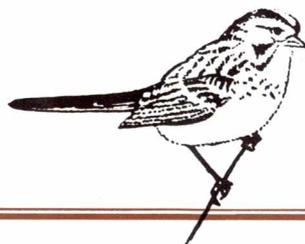
*Dominico*  
or dark-backed goldfinch.



*Gorrión mariposa*  
or painted bunting.

DOMESTICATED BIRDS IN MEXICO AND THE SOUTHERN UNITED STATES  
 DURING THE PRE-HISPANIC PERIOD

SPECIES	NAME IN NAHUATL	NAME USED IN MEXICO	NAME IN ENGLISH
<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i> *	<i>uexolotl</i>	<i>guajolote</i>	<i>turkey</i>
<i>Ara macao</i> *	<i>alo</i>	<i>guacamaya roja</i>	<i>scarlet macaw</i>
<i>Amazona xantcephala</i>	<i>toznene</i>	<i>loro coroniamarillo</i>	<i>yellow-headed parrot</i>
<i>Amazona albifrons</i> *	<i>cocho</i>	<i>loro frentiblanco</i>	<i>white-fronted parrot</i>
<i>Aratinga canicularis</i> *	<i>quiliton</i>	<i>periquillo</i>	<i>orange-fronted parakeet</i>
<i>Cassidix palustris</i> **	<i>tzanatl</i>	<i>zanate, tordo fino</i>	<i>slender-billed grackle</i>
<i>Cotinga amabilis</i>	<i>xiuhtototl</i>	<i>azulejo real</i>	<i>lovely cotinga</i>
<i>Agelaius phoeniceus</i>	<i>acolchichi</i>	<i>tordo sargento</i>	<i>red-winged blackbird</i>
<i>Carduelis psaltria</i>	<i>coztototl</i>	<i>dominico</i>	<i>dark-backed goldfinch</i>
<i>Passerina ciris</i>	<i>hoauhtototl</i>	<i>gorrión mariposa</i>	<i>painted bunting</i>
<i>Toxostoma curvirostre</i>	<i>cuitlachochin</i>	<i>cuitlacoche</i>	<i>curve billed thrasher</i>
<i>Mimus polyglotoos</i>	<i>centzontl atole</i>	<i>centzontle</i>	<i>common mockingbird</i>
<i>Carpodacus mexicanus</i>	<i>nochtototl</i>	<i>gorrión mexicano</i>	<i>house finch</i>
<i>Melospiza melodia</i>	<i>quatoztli</i>	<i>gorrión de canto</i>	<i>song sparrow</i>



\* In danger of extinction.  
 \*\* Classified as extinct.