mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “What’s that red thing on a turkey?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug! So, my friend Amy is letting me borrow this. It's a feather that she got from a turkey. She's an artist, and she likes to paint turkeys. I asked her: why do you like to paint turkeys? And she said she loves how colorful they are. Look at her artwork. Isn't that incredible? They really are colorful.

Someone named Nikita has a question about turkeys. Let's give him a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Nikita!
- I have a question for you. What's that red thing on a turkey?
- That's a great question.

Here's an actual turkey seen in the wild. You can see all that weird-looking red stuff on its head. Let's get a closer look. There, what is this stuff? Well, it's made of loose skin. This part right here has a name—it's called a wattle. And then you probably noticed this other funny-looking part hanging over the turkey's beak. It has a name, too—it's called a snood. I promise I'm not making these names up. A wattle and a snood! But now check this out. Here's an entire group of turkeys. What do you notice?

Well, you might have noticed that not all of the turkeys have that red, brightly colored skin on their heads. Only some of them have it. Here's the difference. This turkey is a girl turkey—a female. This one is a boy turkey—a male. It's only the male turkeys that have that red wattle and the brightly colored skin on their head. In fact, the males also have shiny feathers on their body and tail feathers that have stripes. The females, they don't have that. They look more plain. Why are the male turkeys more brightly colored than the females? Well, here's one clue. This is a male turkey. Watch what the male turkey does. There, you see that? Here's another male turkey doing this. The male turkeys puff themselves up to look big, and they show off all those colorful features they have, like the red wattle on their head and all those striped feathers on their tail. Scientists have figured out that the reason the male turkeys do this is because they're trying to impress the female. It's a behavior that's called a display behavior. It might seem weird, but there are actually lots of birds besides just turkeys where the male looks more fancy and tries to show off, like chickens, for example. You can probably guess which one of these is the male. It's this one—a rooster. You might have noticed before that a rooster—a male chicken—has this thing on top of its head. Look, it also has a wattle on its neck just like a turkey does. Roosters even puff themselves up and do a display. Here's another one you might know—it's a peacock. This is the male, and here's the female. Do you notice how she's more plain-looking? The male peacock doesn't have a wattle, but it does do a display, and it has some of the fanciest tail feathers of any bird. Check out its display, whoa! Or look at these. These are mallard ducks. It's only the males that have the fancy green heads. The females are the more plain-looking ones. Now it might not seem fair that the males look fancy while the females look plain, but with many of these examples, it's usually the female that sits on the nest with the eggs. Remember, the males are more colorful. If they stayed in the nest with the eggs, it'd be easier for a predator to find the nest. But that said, it's not always the males that look fancy. This kind of bird is called a

phalarope, and with phalaropes, the female is more colorful than the male. And guess what? The male phalarope stays on the nest, and it's the female phalarope that tries to impress the male by doing a fancy display in flight.

So in summary, the red thing on a turkey's neck is called a wattle. Only the male turkeys have them. Males display for females, and wattles are one of the fancy features that they use to show off. Lots of birds have either a male or a female that looks colorful and fancy, while the other one looks plain.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Nikita, for asking it.