
BIRDS
Grey Partridge
Plump, rounded and rapidly declining in number, the grey partridge is one of Britain's few indigenous game birds, popularised by the classic carol The Twelve Days of Christmas. This once-flourishing avian has distinctive camouflage to help it blend into thicket and farmland: delicate ash-grey feathers, a striking rust-coloured head and a dark horseshoe-shaped stomach patch. Despite festive depictions of the partridge in a pear tree, these birds are strictly ground dwellers, scurrying across grasslands and nesting in hedgerows. They are also reluctant flyers. When danger approaches, partridges prefer to flee on foot but will, if flushed, burst into a low whirring glide across the grassland.
Exactly how the partridge found its way into the pear tree remains an enduring Christmas mystery though one popular theory points towards a corruption of ure perdrix (the French for partridge), which was simplified into 'pear tree' over time, resulting in the lyric we sing today.
Key to plate
1: Grey partridge
Perdix Perdix
2: Pear tree
Pyrus communis
Pear harvest happens in the autumn, which is why these juicy fruits are so commonly used in festive cooking
14

Reindeer

It is no coincidence that Father Christmas chose reindeer to pull his sleigh, as they are strong, hardy and capable of traversing more than 5,000km a year. As one of the earliest domesticated animals, reindeer share an ancient alliance with humans. These antlered deer thrive in colder climes of Europe, North America and Asia, residing in the frozen northern forests and the Arctic tundra. Covered in fur from head to hoof, reindeer use their useful dew claws to grip onto slippery surfaces and burrow through the snow, feasting on the ferns, fungi and lichen hidden below.

Unlike their magical counterparts, these animals do not need a glowing red nose to illuminate the way. As one of the few large mammals that can see ultraviolet light, reindeer are able to find food, locate predators and stay safe even in the dark, bleak winter when sunlight is scarce.

Key to plate

1: **White spruce**
Picea glauca
This large evergreen conifer is the northernmost species of North America. However, recent studies suggest the treeline is advancing further north, towards the Arctic tundra. It is possible that warming temperatures caused by climate change have allowed them to grow here, in an area where the soil would normally be too shallow.

2: **Reindeer**
Rangifer tarandus



European Robin

With its rust-coloured plumage and curious expression, the European robin is a plump, small-billed bird that breeds throughout Europe, Western Asia and parts of North Africa. A much-loved sight, the robin can be spotted all year round, the welcome sound of its melodic warbling filling the frosty air even during winter. As natural ground feeders, robins can be found hopping around gardens, woodlands and parks, foraging for insects and worms.

Despite being only 14cm long, these tiny birds are fiercely territorial, puffing up their scarlet chests and fighting off any feathered intruders that invade their patch. Robins are considered modern Yuletide mascots. They first appeared on Victorian Christmas cards as an ode to the vermilion-coloured uniform of the postmen who delivered them. These postal workers were aptly nicknamed 'redbreasts'.

Key to plate

1: **European robin**
Erithacus rubecula

2: **Common holly**
Ilex aquifolium
The evergreen holly bush is the UK's most festive plant and for hundreds of years it has been used, along with ivy, to decorate homes at Christmastime. Today, this prickly plant, with its water-resistant waxy leaves and bright red berries, makes the ideal festive wreath.



Wild Turkey

For many households, Christmas dinner would not be complete without one large, oven-roasted bird taking prime place. Hailing from Mexico, the domestic turkey was first introduced to Europe in the 16th century as an exclusive upper-class delicacy. The turkey's Christmas connection emerged shortly after, when Henry VIII famously feasted on the exotic fowl during his festive banquet. Since then, turkey as a food has risen in popularity and grown in affordability, helped in part by advances in food production and Charles Dickens's inordinate fondness for the bird.

Today, turkeys have a reputation as odd-looking, ungainly birds, but throughout history they have been venerated as powerful, majestic creatures. Wild turkeys come in a variety of dazzling colours, with beautiful iridescent blue, bronze and green plumages. The Mayans venerated these noble fowl and valued their spectacular feathers highly, using them to make ornamental cloaks, garments and headdresses.



Key to plate

1: **Wild turkey**
Meleagris gallopavo

2: **American hazelnut**
Corylus americana
These tasty nuts are a favourite of wild turkeys, pheasants, quail and grouse, providing an important food source during the tough winter months.

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Festive Flavours

As Christmas draws near, festive flavours waft through kitchens across the globe, filling the air with traditional aromas of nutmeg, ginger and clove. In Europe, roasted sweet chestnuts make a tasty Christmas treat, harvested from the *Castanea sativa* tree with its prickly husks and grooved bark. The zingy orange is another popular festive food, gifted to well-behaved children or peppered with cloves to make a pomander ball. This practice dates back to medieval times, when such spice-studded pomander balls perfumed the frosty air to ward off bad spirits and winter illnesses.

The iconic Christmas pudding also has humble origins, dating back to a porridge-like prune dish served in the 14th century. Although it originally formed part of a British tradition, the Christmas pudding is a global festive phenomenon, enjoyed by families far and wide in countries like South Africa, Australia and Canada. This dessert is often seasoned with cinnamon, a warm, fragrant spice derived from the inner bark of the Ceylon tree of Sri Lanka.

Key to plate

1: **Christmas pudding**
Filled with the quintessential flavours of the festive season, Christmas puddings are packed with citrus fruits, currants, cloves and spices, most of which are harvested from tropical trees.

2: **Orange**
Citrus × *sinensis*
Gifting oranges at Christmastime may be a tradition that began with St Nicholas himself. According to legend, he threw balls of gold into people's homes, with one accidentally landing in a stocking that was drying by the fireplace.

3: **Star anise**
Illicium verum
Star anise is the name given to the spice that is harvested from the fruits of *Illicium verum*. Highly fragrant, it is used in a variety of food and drinks, from mulled wine, to masala chai, cakes and curries.

