

BUCKEYES: ALL-AMERICA CHICKENS

by Christine Heinrichs (*Backyard Poultry Magazine*)

No chicken breed is perfect, but many Buckeye breeders figure they have come close enough with their breed. Breeders extol the virtues of vigor, resilience and disease resistance in a bird that grows to a solid size and lays plenty of eggs. The bird's buckeye-color feathers and friendly, easy-going disposition win the eye and the heart. The breed has played an interesting role in poultry history, giving their breeders the honor of carrying the torch into the future.

That's a lot for one breed to live up to, but Buckeyes are equal to the task. W.H. Card, identified as a judge and breeder in the article he wrote about Buckeyes in the March 1913 issue of *American Poultry Advocate*, describes them with affection: "Their flesh-carrying ability being as natural as their vigorous, active disposition, there is never any loss of weight by persistent and constant foraging when on free range. In confinement they show no phlegmatic tendencies, being always busy and on the move without nervousness or seeming discontent, therefore keeping in the best of flesh and fettle at any season of the year."

Buckeye History

One of the Buckeye's distinctions is that it is the only breed credited entirely to a woman for its creation. The estimable Nettie Metcalf turned her attention to creating the breed at the turn of the 20th century. She was intrigued with the Rhode Island Red, even calling her birds Buckeye Reds when she first introduced them, as a pea comb variety, distinct from the single and rose comb varieties of Rhode Island Reds.

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Her birds' darker mahogany color and separate breeding gave the Buckeye a distinct identity, and she observed that they might well be confused with the RIR and absorbed into that breed unless efforts were made to keep them separate.

"Many names for my new breed suggested themselves," she wrote later, reflecting back on her experience. "Year after year they bred truer to the type I had in mind, which was a modified Cornish shape, with the very darkest of red plumage, hens containing some black not being objectionable to me, so long as the males kept that dark red shade I admired." [quoted in *The American Breeds of Poultry* by Frank L. Platt, 1921.]

Although she sought that Cornish shape, she did not use Cornish to develop the breed. Her first cross, Buff Cochin cockerels on Barred Rock hens, "produced a big, lazy fowl, so I looked around for something else to mix in." She settled on Black Breasted Red Games, crossed with those fat and lazy hens. She selected the red offspring from that mating and bred them to each other.

"My, what a flock I raised that year," she remembered. "No wonder my friends laughed. Green legs and feathered legs, buff chicks, black chicks, and even red-and-black barred chicks; single combs and pea combs and no combs at all, but all fighters from way back."

Jeff Lay of Miamisburg, Ohio keeps about 200 Buckeyes on his own property and three other local farms. He notes that although Cornish birds were not included in Mrs. Metcalf's original breeding, the Games she used would likely have had Cornish in their background. Cornish were often called Indian Games at the turn of the 20th century.

"You can't help but see the Cornish in them," he said, "especially in the head."

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ALBC's Buckeye Project

Buckeyes got a boost in 2005 from the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy's project for Renewing America's Food Traditions, a collaboration of several groups, including the Center for Sustainable Environments, Chef's Collaborative, Cultural Conservancy, Native Seed/SEARCH, Seed Savers Exchange and Slow Food USA, which provided funding for the project. At that point, the breed was somewhat degraded.

"We wanted to create a model to recover chicken breeds with good potential as broilers," said Jeannette Beranger, research & technical program manager for ALBC.

Applying principles gleaned from historical and technical sources, the birds were maturing two weeks faster, weighed a pound more and had improved in egg production after three years of selective breeding. The resulting materials are available free online at <http://www.albc-usa.org/EducationalResources/chickens.html>. One of the old books that stood out is *The Call of the Hen*, an early 20th century publication of the American Poultry School in Kansas City, Missouri. It is available online through Google Books at <http://books.google.com>, then search for title.

"It's a fabulous book," said Ms. Beranger. "He broke down the process of deciding which birds have the best potential in a common sense approach."

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The project enlisted individuals who were experienced breeders to raise the birds, report the results and return at least a trio of their birds to ALBC. Those who wanted to continue breeding the Buckeyes were welcome to process the rest of the flock as they wanted. By the

third year, the birds met Mrs. Metcalf's historic standard and surprised the exhibition world by winning reserve champion in the American class at the Ohio National in 2007.

The project generated publicity for the breed, encouraging more breeders to start their own flocks. The Buckeye, although still far from plentiful, is a much stronger breed than it was before the project started. They live up to their reputation as consistent layers of 150-200 eggs a year, slowing down somewhat when it's hot. The pullets reach 4-1/2 to 5 lbs., the cockerels 6 lbs. at 16 weeks. Her birds, like Judge Card's, gained weight equally well whether they ranged on pasture or lived in pens. Although she finds them "not as predator-savvy" as Leghorns, neither do they have any inclination to peck at each other or pluck feathers.

"They are peaceful," she said. "We like their personalities."

She noted another advantage when she moved her breeding flock of around 20 birds on her half-acre front lawn to give them more space: "I didn't have to mow the grass."

Buckeyes on the Table

Proper cooking is essential to bring out the flavor and make it tender. Birds at 16-18 weeks are too tough for frying or sautéing. Frederic Beranger, an experienced professional cook, finds the tabletop rotisserie gives the best results. The rotisserie encloses water, to cook with moist heat, and the meat self-bastes. Crock pots and other slow cooking methods work well.

Reserve Champion American Breed at the Southern Ohio Poultry Association's 17th Annual Fall Show in Lucasville on October 3, 2009. The eight-month-old pullet comes from Mrs. Haggarty's crossing of birds from the John Brown and ALBC lines. Photo by Tiffany Mullins. Chef Emeril Lagasse cooked four of the Berangers' Buckeyes for a Food Network show that aired in November, 2009. He used a traditional Italian method, butterflying the bird and marinating it, then cooking it under a brick wrapped in foil. The weight of the brick flattens the meat and cooks it evenly.

The Berangers find that Buckeyes produce a sturdy gelatin and stock. Mr. Beranger calls it Liquid Gold. The gelatin can be used instead of

goose fat in making pate and confit.

Living with Buckeyes

That charming Buckeye personality won Laura Haggarty of Williamstown, Kentucky's heart. They greet her so warmly, she can hardly walk, impeded by chickens clustered around her feet. Relations among birds are congenial, with roosters taking a gentle interest in watching over the flock and little fighting between males. Their social nature is expressed in a variety of vocalizations, from a purr to a roar, particularly among the roosters.

"You can tell they used to be dinosaurs," Mrs. Haggarty said.

She observes that they are strong from the start.

"They practically leap out of their shells," she said.

Mrs. Haggarty's foundation sire, a cock bird which won Best of Breed at the Top of Ohio show in June, 2009 and which was Reserve Champion of the Junior Show at the Bluegrass Show in 2007 (shown below being held by Colleen Haggarty).

They grow fast, but benefit from higher protein feed than other breeds, as much as 30 percent, for the first 16-18 weeks. Chick feed is around 20 percent protein, so many start them on game bird starter, around 28 percent. Many Buckeye owners supplement that with meal worms, which can be grown separately. The birds often enjoy yogurt, a source of protein and calcium.

Her care is working: One of her Buckeye pullets took Reserve Champion American Breed at the Southern Ohio Poultry Association's 17th Annual Fall Show in Lucasville in October. The eight-month-old pullet comes from Mrs. Haggarty's crossing of birds from the John Brown and ALBC lines.

"It doesn't happen that often that a Buckeye makes it to Champion Row," she said. "It's such a pleasure when one does. It's nice to see the birds' profile is getting a bit higher."

Mrs. Beranger recommends adding apple cider vinegar to the water a couple of times a week as a preventive against coccidia. She also feeds each bird a teaspoon a week of a remedy she makes herself, to boost immune systems and resist worms. She adapted the mixture from a recipe provided by

Juliette de Bairacli Levy's Complete Herbal Handbook for Farm and Stable:

4 parts molasses 4 parts olive oil, wheat germ oil or cod liver oil 1 part ground comfrey leaf or ground cayenne pepper 2 parts garlic

"They eat it like candy," she said.

Buckeye Clubs

Reviving a dwindling breed means supporting breeders who are taking on a new project. At present there are two clubs for those who breed Buckeyes. Mr. Lay of Ohio resurrected the name of the original American Buckeye Club for a breeders group in 2009, one hundred years after the first club was started. The American Buckeye Club focuses on improving the production values of the breed. A list of breeders is posted on its site, www.americanbuckeyeclub.org/. Its Yahoo discussion group can be accessed from the site.

Another club, the American Buckeye Poultry Club was started by Mrs. Haggarty in 2008. Its focus is to breed birds in accordance with the APA and ABA Standards, while still retaining the heritage values that make the breed so special. She has recruited Mrs. Beranger as a technical advisor, and the group is a registered 501c(3)nonprofit. It is a more traditional club for those who show their birds, but also is open to anyone with an interest in the breed. Organizational details of point systems and districts are still being ironed out, and the first official meeting was held at the Ohio National show, on November 14th, 2009. "A breed club can help members find other people who have stock to bring new blood into your flock," Mrs. Haggarty said. "It gives you someone to turn to, so you aren't starting at Square One."

Mrs. Haggarty's experience with online forums gave her the background to use the Internet to attract members. The club's Yahoo group, AmericanBuckeye-PoultryClub, is a lively exchange of information among those new to the breed, as well as those with more extensive experience with Buckeyes. The club's website

is<http://www.americanbuckeyepoultryclub.com>.

Reviving a Declining Breed

Duane Urch, revered poultry judge and breeder, has had his flock since 1958, when he acquired them from Howard Tallman of Florida, now deceased. Mr. Urch remembers that Tallman provided food to his chicks in crocks, so that the chicks had to be strong enough to jump over the sides. He changed the crocks for ones with higher sides as the chicks grew, to continue providing a challenge. That was one of his ways of ensuring the vitality of his birds, Mr. Urch said.

Mr. Urch was disappointed with his 2009 hatch, though. He is looking for additional birds to breed into his flock next year, ideally from a flock raised from birds that came from his flock in the past. Please contact him at Urch/Turnland Poultry, 2142 NE 47th Avenue, Owatonna, MN 55060-1074, (507) 451-6782 if you have birds from his line that could be bred back into his flock.

More Buckeye history is yet to be uncovered. Genealogical research may contribute additional information about Mrs. Metcalf. Mrs. Haggarty pursues research professionally, and has found documentation for Mrs. Metcalf's three children. Unfortunately, the last one of them died in 1988, leaving no heirs. However, the increased interest in Buckeyes may yet unearth records that will add more detail to the journey of this historic breed.