

Photographs by Chris Graham.



A breed worthy of more attention

The RBST breed description of the Black Spanish refers to an active, flighty bird that is probably a breed for the specialist. Leading breeder Andy Marshall, however, believes that it is a breed worthy of more attention. Here he describes the Black Spanish and offers some advice for would-be breeders.

The Black Spanish is a breed whose history is both vague and based on assumptions. It is of the same family as the Castilian and Minorca yet it is not known in Spain and there are no records to confirm the position either way.

What we do know from recognised authors such as Edward Brown, Lewis Wright and Rev T W Sturges is that the breed was well established and popular in the UK during the early 1800s and was kept for its reputation for producing excellent layers of large white eggs. Unfortunately, at some point, fanciers took hold of the breed with the result that vigour and vitality were lost in favour of the fashionable and desirable large white faces. In the UK there was a trend for cauliflower-type faces, whereas in the low countries of Europe, where the breed was also popular, it was for a smaller comb and smooth face.

In the mid 1800's exhibitions of 300 were commonplace but nowadays you are lucky to see one or two at the winter shows. Even pre-First World War the once widespread and popular Spanish was classified as a rare breed.

The Spanish seen in the UK today are

of the smooth-face type and, as far as I have been able to find out, have had such faces since the early 1900s. There are various theories for this, yet I suspect it was a combination of fashion, the Minorca replacing the Spanish as a source of large white eggs, and the loss of vigour resulting from the cossetting, especially of the males, to produce the large white faces.

I have kept the breed since the early 1990s, obtaining my stock originally from the late Eric Parker. For 20 years, there was some healthy competition with the late David Scrivener and John Odell and we would all swap birds, which kept the strain fit and healthy, and Spanish were distributed to many poultry keepers. However, for whatever reason, few seemed to persevere with the breed and we are now in a precarious position with few serious breeders left.

When seen out on range they are a most attractive fowl, with beetle green sheen, red head points and the distinctive white face. The females are long-lived and hardy, being good layers of white eggs at a rate of around 150-200 per year. I have had females living outside all year in all weathers, roosting high in beech trees, coming down to lay and feed in the shed they are supposed to sleep in. Fertility and hatchability has never been an issue with the breed, though the males don't like the wind and can succumb for no reason in the second moult.

I have always kept the males inside in the winter in large well littered pens, once they start to crow this is best done on

an individual basis to avoid face damage when they bicker. The females need space and do well both inside and out. The males' faces will blister if not kept correctly and the feeding of pellets rather than mash, with water troughs well away from the feed troughs, is important. They do suffer if kept in wet or damp conditions.

As a breed the Black Spanish is certainly worthy of more attention since 150 years ago, and especially in the south west of England, it was the go-to breed for white eggs. As a breeder of the Black Spanish, I do hope that readers of this article with the right facilities and interested in supporting something rare, will consider taking up this breed which, without doubt, is part of our heritage.

Andy Marshall is well-known throughout the poultry world and has been breeding and showing since the 1960s, showing his first Maran hen when he was 8. He has a passion for keeping and showing pure-bred poultry and regards it as part of his mission to welcome newcomers to poultry breeding by offering practical advice and encouragement.

If you are interested in boosting the numbers of Black Spanish breeders, Andy is prepared to sell hatching eggs.

He can be contacted on andy@stablegreenpoultry.co.uk.

For more information, visit www.stablegreenpoultry.co.uk.

Gene editing could show the way for poultry conservation

Scientists at Edinburgh's Roslin Institute have produced genetically 'edited' chickens to be used as surrogates able to lay eggs from any rare breed. The development was unveiled by Dr Mike McGrew, who leads the project, in a study published in the journal *Development*.

The surrogacy technique involves first genetically engineering hens to be sterile, which is done by deleting a gene called DDX4. This gene plays an essential role in the generation of specialised cells – primordial germ cells or follicles – which give rise to eggs and is crucial to bird fertility. Its removal means that the chickens are unable to produce eggs themselves, but are otherwise healthy. The next step is to implant primordial follicles from other breeds so that the surrogate chicken produces eggs containing all of the genetic information from the chosen breed. The transplant of the follicles is done before the surrogate chick is hatched from its own egg and means that it will go on to lay eggs belonging to a different breed.

Unlike eggs, primordial follicles can be frozen efficiently, and the ultimate goal of the project – named the Frozen Aviary – is to establish a gene bank aimed at preserving a wide variety of poultry breeds. Explaining the team's work, Dr McGrew said: "We're interested in chickens because that is the most consumed animal on the planet and we want to protect all the different breeds of chicken we have. These chickens are a first step in saving and protecting rare poultry breeds from loss in order to preserve future biodiversity of our poultry from both economic and climate stresses."

As well as providing a means of accelerating the growth of rare breed poultry populations, a key advantage of the Frozen Aviary would be to allow scientists to rapidly expand any population that contained a protective gene for a new disease.

In developing the project, Dr McGrew approached the RBST Poultry Working Group to discuss the science involved and the Group was able to help in providing contacts for obtaining examples of the

various breeds. Field Officer Richard Broad says: "It is important to note that this work involves genetic engineering rather than genetic modification or GM. GM is achieved by altering DNA, by introducing genetic material from one organism into another in order to enhance it in some way. This project involves deleting a gene so that birds are capable of being surrogates and helping in the continuation of valuable rare genetics. It is aimed at preserving, not changing, the genetics of rare varieties. The work has the potential to form an important adjunct to our own Gene Bank work and we couldn't wish for anything better."

The research, which also involved scientists from the US biotechnology company Recombinetics, was funded by strategic investment from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. The study can be found on <http://dev.biologists.org/content/develop/early/2017/02/06/dev.145367.full.pdf>.

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