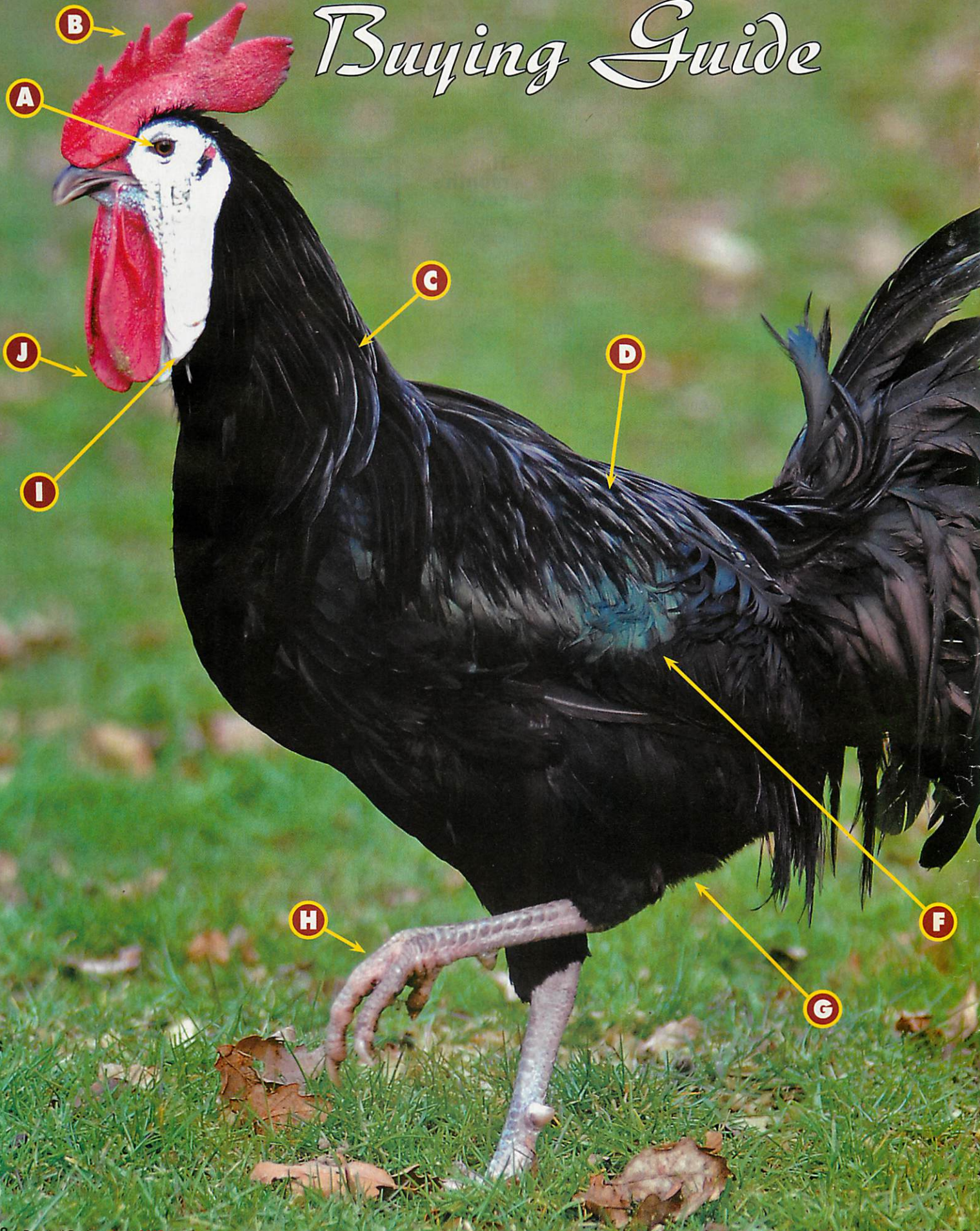


SPANISH

Buying Guide





Chris Graham investigates a once-popular Mediterranean rarity that's undeservedly fallen from grace



Many of you may be familiar with the film *Hidalgo*, which tells the story of an American horse rider who was invited, in 1897, to take part in the annual Ocean of Fire; a race across 3,000 miles of the Arabian desert. This race, which is a centuries-old tradition, was usually only open to the finest, pure-bred Arabian horses and their Bedouin riders. So when ex-cowboy and stunt rider, Frank T Hopkins was invited to take part on his 'impure' Mustang, hackles among many of the locals were raised.

I won't spoil things for those who've not seen the film by revealing how the race progresses but, suffice to say, it's a rollicking good yarn. I mention it here because, unlikely as it may seem, there's a link between the film and this month's buying guide breed. 'Hidalgo' is a word traditionally used to describe members of the Spanish nobility. Coincidentally, it's a word that's also been applied to the Spanish breed of chicken.

Noble breed

The renowned artist, writer and poultry enthusiast, Harrison Weir, had this to say about the breed in his book, *Our Poultry*: 'It has been ever looked upon as a very "Hidalgo" of poultry; a prince of "blue blood"; a bird of almost royal pedigree; its gallant bearing, its haughty, lofty carriage, its stately walk, its purity of colour, its graceful form, its brilliant coral-red, high, upstanding, well-spiked crest; its long, pendulous, parti-coloured wattles of smoothly even texture; a style all its own; these, and more than these even, so took the eye as to captivate, and they at once

Head of the expansive and influential family of Mediterranean fowl

found places in and won the Fanciers' esteem.'

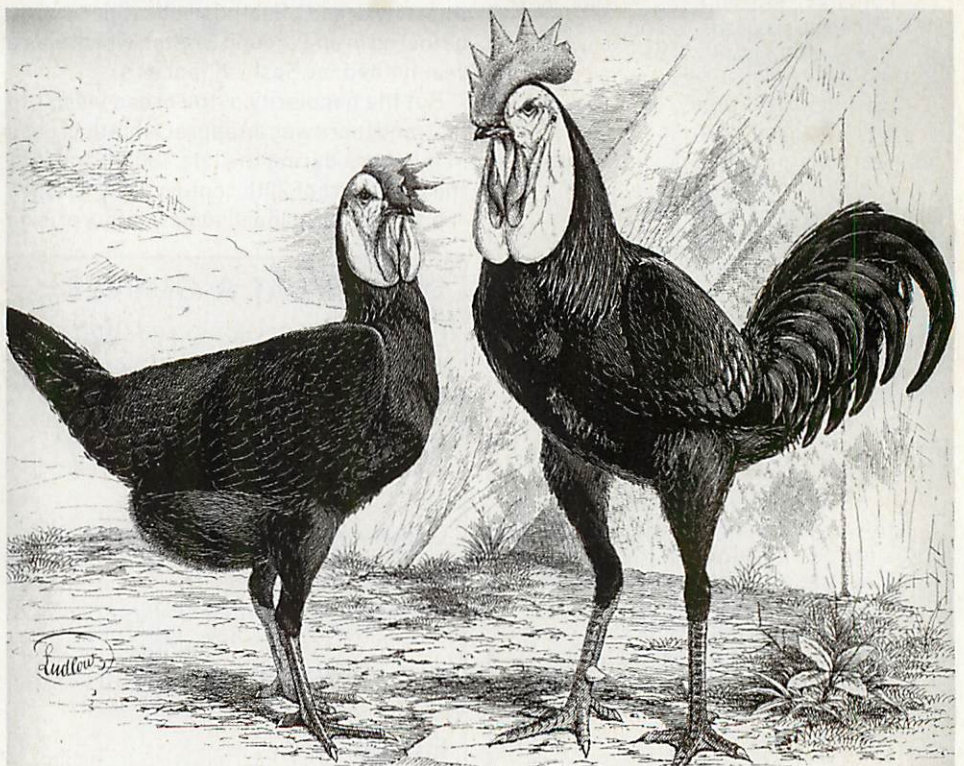
His obvious enthusiasm for the breed continued: 'Nor was this all. For it had the silky white, singular and beautiful covering of the space between its ear and beak, and extending to the base of the comb and surrounding the wattles, being of itself an arrangement so novel, so interesting and so capable of being dealt with by skilful matching and other varying methods of the poultry breeder's art, that it not only recommended these qualities to present notice, but to further treatment and development.'

Quite obviously, Weir was smitten with the breed, but he certainly wasn't alone; a great many enthusiasts felt exactly the same around the middle of the 19th century. The Spanish was a firm favourite at that time, appreciated not only for its distinctive appearance, but for its prowess as a layer of large, white-shelled eggs too.

Ancient history

The White-faced Black Spanish, to give the breed its full title, sits at the head of the expansive and influential family of Mediterranean fowl. Other members include the Ancona, Andalusian, Leghorn and Minorca, but the Spanish really is the daddy of them all!

What's particularly interesting is that



Period Ludlow print from *Wright's Book of Poultry*, published in the early 1900s.

IMPORTANT BUYING TIPS

(refer to the main photograph on page 8)

- A** Eye colour should be as dark as possible, with black being the ideal. However, it's worth noting that this can lighten on birds that are kept inside, and also on hens that are laying heavily. So, when buying, it's important to know a bit of background before making a final judgement about the eye colour being displayed.
- B** Ideally the rear of the comb should follow the line of the neck as closely as possible. 'Flyaway' combs aren't desirable. Side sprigs on the comb are another bad point. The male comb must always be straight and erect, and shouldn't be too large for the head; you're after a balanced, overall effect.
- C** Red or reddish-gold feathers will sometimes be seen among the male hackle feathers. While this is a serious defect from an exhibition point of view, it's a desirable factor for the breeding pen. Birds displaying this, which are then mated with good black females, will produce excellent richness and beetle green sheen among the offspring.
- D** The Spanish body is rather long, broad at the shoulder and tapering towards the tail. The back should show a downward slope from the base of the neck to the tail.
- E** Tail is full with long, curved sickles on male birds. It shouldn't be carried too high, and you should avoid wry or squirrel-type tails.
- F** A lustrous, beetle-green sheen should be apparent on all body feathering under the right lighting conditions. Avoid birds showing any white or red in the feathers, and those with a purplish sheen. White tipping of feathers can occur on older females. Undercolour should be dark, right down to the skin.
- G** Feathering on the body is generally close and fairly tight; any sign of fluffiness is best avoided.
- H** Legs and feet should be slate grey, but not black. Avoid duck-footed examples. Spurs on mature males can become sharp and need to be watched on feisty examples during the breeding season.
- I** From an exhibition point of view, the face needs to be as big and even as possible, when viewed from the front and the side. Lobes need to be long, smoothly-textured and free from scabbing or other signs of damage. It's also important that the lobes are as white and wrinkle-free as possible. Red or blue can creep in on lesser examples; both should be avoided. Lobes that are pointed at the bottom, rather than rounded, represent a serious exhibition fault.
- J** Wattles should be bright red, pendulous, smooth and of an even length.

all these breeds are known as non-sitters (the hens rarely settle reliably to incubate their own eggs), which, of course, goes against natural survival instincts. To breed this basic instinct out of a bird, in favour of out-and-out egg production, takes many generations of domestication and careful selection. Then for this characteristic to prosper in so many breeds, over such a wide area all around the fringes of the Mediterranean sea, is quite amazing.

But, like many of the breeds from this part of the world, plenty of the more recent changes – both good and bad – were instigated in countries other than the birds' homelands. The Spanish is one of the oldest breeds we have, and is thought to have been created from the original Castilian fowl, the common black chicken of Spain. Although some records identify the breed as being in Britain as far back as the late 1500s, others suggest that it first started becoming popular here as a working utility fowl following British involvement in the Peninsula Wars between 1807 and 1814.

Showman's favourite

The breed was adopted as an exhibitors' favourite once the poultry showing movement started gathering momentum during the Victorian era. At that time, breeders followed two routes with regard to the bird's white face and extended lobes. While some fanciers favoured the smooth-textured, kid-glove look, others opted to develop a more pronounced, cauliflower-like appearance. In addition, the colour of the legs was changed, and the comb on the male bird was evolved into one that permanently stood vertically. Interestingly, many of this new breed of enthusiast keeper were gathered in and around Bristol, which was a real hotbed for Spanish fanciers.

But the popularity of the breed wasn't to last, and there was an appreciable decrease in numbers during the late 1800s, and into the early part of 20th century. This actually represented a rapid and somewhat surprising



Poor comb and lobes on this female.

fall from grace, and one for which it's difficult to pinpoint a cause. Opinions vary, but it seems likely that too much in-breeding (as exhibitors sought the ultimate show bird) caused a significant loss in egg-laying performance; thus damaging one of the bird's great practical strengths. What's more, the situation can't have been helped by the, arguably untimely, arrival of the Minorca, a high-performing relation of the Spanish.

Numbers continued to fall during both World Wars, and it wasn't until the early 1970s that a group of notable breeders – Rex Woods, Eric Parker and Fred Hams – undertook a joint project to revitalise the Spanish. As a consequence, the situation has improved somewhat here in the UK, although the breed is still without a dedicated club, and overall numbers elsewhere in Europe are

“Can develop into the friendliest of garden companions”

SPANISH AT A GLANCE

Plus points: Ancient breed, good winter layer, striking looks, large eggs, hardiness

Minus points: Very rare and hard to buy, it's a flier, non-sitter, males are short-lived

Classification: Large fowl; light, rare

Origin: Mediterranean

Weights: Large male 3.2kg (7lb)

Female 2.7kg (6lb)

Bantam male 1075g (38oz)

Female 910g (32oz)

Egg laying: 170+

Colours: Black

FURTHER INFORMATION

Despite its great age, former popularity and many desirable qualities, there's no dedicated club supporting the Spanish. So those interested in finding out more about the breed, or sourcing stock to buy, should contact Mary Derriman at the Rare Poultry Society, Danby, The Causeway, Congresbury, Bristol BS49 5DJ (tel: 01934 833619) or visit the Society's website at:

www.rarepoultrysociety.co.uk



Spanish hens should show a folded comb, like this. However, this example is slightly let down by a light-coloured eye.



This is typical of the sort of male lobe pecking damage caused by hens in the breeding pen.

reportedly worryingly low too.

A bantam version does exist (created by David Scrivener during the 1980s) although, nowadays, these are just about as rare as the large fowl.

The Spanish is a bit of a 'love 'em or hate 'em' sort of breed; the white face is something which most poultry enthusiasts have fairly definite views about, and the way in which it became so grossly exaggerated by fanciers during the 1800s may well have been another influencing factor in the breed's premature tumble in terms of its fashionable appreciation.

Unmistakable looks

The Spanish remains a bird of simple, clean lines. It has a longish body that slopes down towards the tail which, itself, is reasonably well spread on the male, but held at a fairly shallow angle.

The head, which sits on a long, well-hackled neck, is crowned by a single, serrated comb (vertical on the male, folded to one side on the female). The face, being pure white, is the breed's most unmistakable feature.

This is framed by the finely-textured, pure white, extended and rounded ear lobes, plus pendulous, bright red wattles. The eyes of the best examples are black.

The bird stands on long, thin and graceful legs, which are free from feathers and pale slate in colour. Feathering is generally short and close-fitting, and should be pure black with a good beetle-green sheen when caught in a favourable light. Fluffiness is something that should never be found on a good Spanish of either sex.

A blue version did exist (30 years ago) and there's even talk of there having been a white one too. But both these colour options have disappeared now, and we're left with the black only.

Despite the eye-catching looks and, at 170+pa, a still very respectable egg-laying potential, the Spanish remains of minority interest in the UK. As already mentioned, there's no specialist club to support the breed so its interests continue to be overseen by the Rare Poultry Society. The number of serious breeders currently working with the bird in this country is estimated at no more than 10, and the situation appears no better elsewhere in mainland Europe. The Spanish, rather inexplicably, really does seem to be a breed that's fallen well and truly off the popularity map.

This is doubly disappointing given the fact that the bird can still

offer a good level of practicality allied to an ease of ownership that should be sufficient to offer a tempting package for even the most inexperienced of keepers. While the white face may not present a look that meets everyone's aesthetic taste, the bird is undeniably striking, and offers a visual simplicity that's hard to beat.

Free spirits

What's more, despite the low overall numbers, fertility is reportedly still good, so hatch rates are high and the chicks produced are strong and fast growers. Adult birds are extremely active and possess a 'chatty' and inquisitive character. Of course, being a light breed, the Spanish also boasts an inherent flying ability, which means they can be wilful straddlers of even the highest garden fences and hedges. But, despite this outward-bound tendency the breed, in common with all those with roots in the Mediterranean region, is also known for its tolerance of confinement.

But don't imagine that the Spanish, with its southern European ancestry and light breed credentials, is a fiery hothead that's hard to handle, because it isn't. These birds respond well to handling, and can

develop into the friendliest of garden companions under the right conditions. Just



Male displaying good lobes and wattles, but a slightly 'fly-away' comb.



The Spanish is an active, inquisitive and 'chatty' sort of chicken; good to have around the garden.

about the only thing to watch out for is the behaviour of the male birds during the breeding season; they can become decidedly feisty once they're in the pen with a few females!

There really are very few problems to worry about associated with the Spanish. In general, they don't tend to fare well under damp and dark conditions (but, of course, very few do!). So, if you intend keeping birds in confinement, then make sure that runs and houses are clean, dry and airy.

The females are significantly more long-lived than the male birds that, for some reason, tend not to last much more than two or three years. Another important aspect to be mindful of is that the hens are attracted to – and will peck at – the males' white lobes. This desire can be heightened if the lobes become scratched by jagged run wiring or brambles, for example. Consequently, most breeders tend to keep the male birds completely separated from the females at all times apart from during the breeding season.

Also, keepers must be wary of the fact that the fleshy extremities (large comb and lobes – males especially), can be affected by low temperatures. Frostbite is a risk during spells of particularly cold

winter weather, although it does need to be really cold to have any serious effect.

Spanish summary

So there you have it. If you're in a market for a rare breed with bags of historical interest, yet that retains a useful degree of practicality – both in terms of hardiness and egg production – then the Spanish is most definitely worth including on your purchasing shortlist.

Of course, with overall numbers as they are at present, good examples are unlikely to be easy to find but, with patience and a sensible approach, it should be perfectly possible to find what you require. The fact that there's only one colour available greatly simplifies the purchase process and, with that colour being black, the complex plumage-related intricacies associated with buying many other breeds are completely absent in this case.

The Spanish, from a quality point of view, is a breed dominated by the head. The standard reveals that 50% of the total points available to a bird in the show pen are awarded based on the excellence of its face and lobes (35%) and its comb and wattles (15%). The presence of colours other than white on the face and lobes, unevenness of wattle and lobe length and

poor lobe texture are just a few of the subtleties which separate the best birds from the rest.

But for those of you contemplating the Spanish as a straightforward backyard fowl, these detail issues are of relatively little concern. While we always recommend buying the best quality stock you can source (there's no point in doing otherwise), there's always a compromise to be struck unless you have your sights set firmly on Championship Row.

Without doubt, the Spanish is thoroughly deserving of further consideration if you're looking for something out of the ordinary, and have an interest in helping to preserve one of the oldest breeds around. ♡

“Definitely worth including on your purchasing shortlist”



Pretty good evenness of wattle and lobe on this male.



Better comb shape on this male, with the rear edge following the line of the neck more closely.