



THE FLEMISH CUCKOO

Searching for their origin

Text and photos:
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Part 5 (end) – Living Heritage

The *Chasse et Pêche* on 03/24/1925 magazine published, in its 03/24/1925 issue, a letter written by Mr. A. Detroy, addressed to the editor, Mr. Pulinckx. In addition to his advocacy for local breeds, he also mentioned that, at a meeting around that period, he and E. Labbé had decided to improve the local cuckoo coloured chicken of their region and name it the **VLAANDERSE KOEKOEK (Flemish Cuckoo)**. So this is where the name emerged for the first time. No wonder that in old books we never encountered that name, but only names as “the old Scotch Grey” or “the old type Malines”.

Detroy further notes that Mr. Ramé in Rennes had the same goals for the common cuckoo chicken there. Unfortunately, he adds, the farmers were aiming for a variety that is as large as possible, as quickly as possible. It so happened that the Poule de Rennes, as soon as they were introduced in the public market, was immediately mated to the Plymouth Rock, in order to obtain a heavier chicken. Detroy experienced that on his own expense, when he bought a few chickens from Rennes to introduce some new blood in his Flemish Cuckoos. These were obviously no birds bred by Ramé, who had carefully kept his line pure, but chickens that roamed free on the farms. When these chicks grew up he immediately saw the impact of the Plymouth Rock. The pullets were plump, with yellow legs and poor tail feathers, in other words, poorly-looking Plymouths. In the ‘Easter issue’ 1933 of the weekly magazine ‘DE BOERDERIJ’ there is an article devoted to the poultry industry in Belgium. It does not surprise us that it

deals with breeding of the Mechelen grouse, but we also read some negative comments. I translate for you:

"...Every farmer kept only a few layers for his own utility. In the Kempen, these were Campines and Brakels for this service; in the Ardennes it was the Ardennes fowl, small country chickens in various colours; in Brabant, the Brabançennes. But above all Belgium was traditionally known for its broilers, more particularly, for its Brussels poulardes, which were exported in large numbers to England. The centre of the broiler production was near Londerzeel, Merchtem and Steenhuffel. It seems however that this industry cannot free itself from a certain deadlock, because in order to meet the demand, tens of thousands of North Holland Blue chickens are imported to cover the deficit of the fattening farms. When we see the lack of progress experienced by the Belgian industry throughout the years, it is somewhat strange to see such a completely different picture compared to the heyday of the poultry farms with layers in the vicinity."

After many breeds disappeared during World War I, World War II went one step further. A lot of breeds are now disappeared or are threatened with extinction. Well beyond World War II, chickens remain luxurious food that is rarely on the table of most families.

In 1987, R. Adolphi is the third ardent defender of the breed, into which he breathes new life by reuniting the remaining chickens and continuing to breed with this strain to dat



(Author's note: Adolphi is very concerned about the breed itself, that he has been breeding constantly since then, but he is also concerned with the history of the breed, hence his contributions to La Basse Court Du Nord. My correspondence with him helped me with some interesting facts, for which I am grateful to him.)

For this he also seeks the few remaining breeders of this breed in Belgium. The only one who responds to his call is Mrs. Nadine Tassef, at that time a known poultry fancier, who had saved some Flemish Cuckoos and bred them according to their old standard. He can purchase some of her chickens. The year after, he

mates the Flemish to the Malines and the other way around, followed by strict selection toward unfeathered legs and correct tail carriage. In Achicourt, December 1992, he exhibits his chickens for the first time. He still remembers that the judge had to check the Poultry Standard in order to assess the birds in the right way.

I myself keep close contacts with both Jourdain and Gaetan, the main breeders at this time, and they strongly reject the idea of outcrossing with the Malines. The leg feathering keeps popping up for up to 10 generations and thus they have to part with too many chicks.

Outcrossing will also give problems with the weight and the tail carriage. Thus, in case it is necessary to get foreign blood, they would rather outcross with the Poule de Rennes, which is better suited in terms of overall impression: same comb, clean legs, but dark cuckoo coloured roosters, which can be a pro, since the Flemish Cuckoos sometimes tend to become too light after a few generations.

In 2000, Dacheville takes over and becomes Chairman of the Club for the Flemish and Picardy Cuckoo, spread over fifty members, together keeping a few hundred chickens around 2008, and they are constantly trying to improve through thorough selection.

In 2011, C. Jourdain takes over the presidency of the club that now also takes the Flemish goose under its wings. By 1980, there are only 4 or 5 breeders of the Flemish Cuckoo left in Belgium, and in 2014 there are eight.



The cuckoo marking

The famous gene 'B', originating from a mutation, is responsible for the cuckoo pattern. This gene is as old as the genes E and S, and equally occurs in remote areas of Africa and Australia. (Source: La Basse Cour du Nord). Also in Northern Europe (Netherlands, Belgium, Northern France) this colour pattern is known and can probably be traced back to at least 1500 (see Iseghem Cuckoo in part 3).

The Flemish cuckoo descends directly from these lines and has never been further crossed during its genesis and development history. (R. Adolphi La coucou de Flandre - histoire d'une volaille régionale <http://www.la-basse-cour-du-nord.fr/>) Only recently, due to lack of sufficient stock, other cuckoo breeds have been used for crossbreeding to keep the breed viable.

Furthermore, a word of explanation about the specific cuckoo marking. The phenotype "cuckoo colour" is due to the gene B (represents cuckoo and barred), which inhibits the pigment depositing from time to time, giving a barred pattern on the feather. From a distance, the sequence of black and white parts, give a view of a gray chicken.

The specificity of gene B is that it is sexlinked and dominant. This gene is located on the male X chromosome. The rooster has a double X chromosome and females have an XY pair; so they get only once the B factor, while the roosters get the double B factor, and this results in the male being lighter in colour than the female. Since the Flemish exists only in one colour (cuckoo) and, if purebred, is always homozygous, you normally have no problems here. This is precisely the problem of the Poule de Rennes, where the inheritance is the same but one day they were outcrossed with black chickens, and so, the wanted colour can be maintained with the roosters only through intensive selection.

The end of my search

Where are we now with our search, after months of research and so many days spent in the libraries? To be quite honest, nowhere! The Flemish Cuckoo has only been documented since his re-creation between 1875 and 1880. Prior to that, the breed had been miraculously ignored, even though we know, thanks to the Malines, that it existed before, because it lies at the base of the Malines. No one can state, with any certainty, invoking original documents or archaeological sources, where our grayish-coloured cuckoo chicken comes from. Also, La Perre de Roo already knew in 1886 that it was a lost quest. He wrote in the introduction to an article "Généalogie des poules domestiques" published in l'Acclimatation Illustrée June 13, 1886 as follows:



"The wish to return today to the origin of the various breeds, or try to find the thread along which the domesticated chicken is formed, is a task to take on that is actually superhuman.

The origin of our breeds is lost in the mists of the past, some of which date back to three thousand years, which makes the research into the genealogy of the breeds is extremely difficult. Moreover, I have no pretention to solve an enigma in front of which even scientists flinch."

I can only fully join here and therefore can merely ask if anyone who knows more about this could please contact me.

To date, the Scotch Grey, the Dominique, the Flemish Cuckoo, the Poule de Rennes, the Picardy, the North Holland Blue, the Malines and the Izegem Cuckoo do still exist and there are Standards for all these breeds. However, the relationship between these Cuckoo chickens has remained hypothetical until now. Perhaps in the near future scientific research and DNA analysis will allow us to give a clearer picture of the true facts.

The breed today

In France, there is a specialty club for the Flemish Cuckoo, while in Flanders the breed is represented by the Stichting Levend Erfgoed (SLE) and the 'Vereniging ter Promotie van Belgische Neerhofdieren' (VPBN).

The latter issues a 'breeders' book' listing the breeders and the breed they keep. In the book of 2011-2012, only 7 breeders of the Flemish Cuckoo were listed, but often they keep only a few specimens.

The Flemish Cuckoo, or *Hoer van de Dender* (Dender Fowl, named after the River Dender, as it is also called, because in the time that the Malines was created, most poultry fatteners lived in this region, logically, as their chickens went to the nearby poultry market of the city of Brussels) - a double duty breed originating in our region, which deserves to be honoured. Its proud appearance and great mobility distinguishes it from the Malines, being much heavier and a typical meat breed. The Flemish Cuckoo lays about 170 eggs per year and there is no winter break. This, coupled with a very fine flavoured meat and the fact that you can tell the difference in sex straight from hatching, makes it an ideal colour variety in backyard poultry.

General characteristics of the Flemish Cuckoo

A medium size chicken, medium high legs, body substantial in build, horizontal carriage. Square body with full, rounded and prominent breast; back broad, flat, rather short, rising to the fairly high carried tail.



Left: Rooster with good marking.



Below: Hens with nicely closed tails.



Left: A hen with deep, broad breast.

The comb: is single, of medium size and fine texture, upright in the male and slightly lopping in the female, like most hens of the farmer's fowl type that are good layers. This is a breed characteristic and you should select for that trait in your hens. The comb without wrinkles, same as the wattles, which often occurs in males who have a too heavy and too thick comb. Unlike the hen, the comb of the cock must be straight and upright and follow the curve of the neck at the back without touching it. Combs with neat, even serrations are preferred. The wattles are medium in length and size in the male and small in the female, red colour.

Right: The comb is wanted in medium size, single and with even serrations.

Below: The double fold at the base of the comb, as in this hen, is not good. A comb with uneven serrations is also not wanted.



The eyes: full, bold, with keen expression, orange-red colour. Too light (yellow, see photo on the right) or greyish/green eyes are absolutely not wanted.



Beak: stout and short, slightly curved, 100 % white at the cock, some grey marking is tolerated in the hens. Too much black or yellow beaks must be selected out.

The ear lobes: round, small, red colour (according to the Belgian Poultry Standard. The French Standard, however, states that the hen's ear lobes "*sablé de blanc*" (mingled with white) are seen as a proof of originality, as this was already stated in the Standards of 1905 and 1914. Moreover, this phenomenon will automatically occur in a pure line without the mingling of new blood.

Face: red, covered with tiny plumes.

The neck: medium in length, in the cock with rich neck hackle feathers up to the shoulders, without covering the shoulders and back.



The wings: strong, well developed and close to the body. A defect that often occurs with the roosters is too low carried wings or hanging wings.

The tail: carried as high as the male, although not vertical, well spread with medium furnishings.

In the female, the tail is nicely closed and less high (45°) broad base and tapering to the end, ending in a nicely rounded tip.

The tail carriage at the rooster should contribute to a proud bearing and the large sickles should be clearly visible and have a rounded shape, with the cuckoo drawing to the end of the feathers. White feathers in the tail are not desirable and should be selected out.

The legs: unfeathered, white/pink. However, it is not unusual to see greyish legs with pullets; a shortcoming which will disappear after the first year.

Weight: Males 3 to 3,5 kg and females 2,5 to 3 kg.

Size: The males reach a height of 60 to 65 cm and the females 40 to 45 cm.

Problems that can occur:

- In the females: birds that are too high on the legs and have a triangle body form.
- Don't breed from birds with folded combs, white ear lobes and too light (yellow) eyes.
- Neither with birds with blurred wings or other feather parts, nor with cocks with plumage that is too dark.
- White or black feathers are not wanted.
- The legs should have 3 toes pointing forward and one pointing backwards, they have to be straight and not crooked.

Right: Cock with very good cuckoo marking up to the tips of the tail feathers.



Left: Blurred wing marking.



Some more defects are:

- Narrow built
- Too light weight
- Too high on the legs
- Breast not deep enough
- Yellow or black legs
- Feathered legs
- Yellow or red feathers
- Tail carried much too low or too high
- Poor tail feathers in the cock
- Too light eye colour
- Too much white in the ear lobes
- Other than single comb



Left: Rooster with too much white in its wings and tail.

These defects are disqualifications:

- White ear lobes.
- Yellow pigment in beak, legs or skin.
- Feather stubs on legs or toes.

For questions, comments or additions to this article please contact the author, Norbert Schollaert, via e-mail : norbert.schollaert@telenet.be

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Photo: A flock of cockerels.



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This is a publication by the online magazine www.aviculture-europe.nl

English edition ISSN: 2352-2445

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