

# CHICKEN RUN

MARANS-  
BANTAMS  
at  
KOEN VAN  
OUWENHUYSEN'S



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Photos: Aviculture Europe

Photo left: Koen with one of his white (splash)-copper Marans bantam cocks and below right: a black copper Marans bantam pullet.

After finishing studies in digital media design at the University of Antwerp, a bright young man named Koen won a monetary award for his endeavours. He went out and bought himself an egg incubator.

"Goodness gracious... you actually breed chickens... what's with that then?" were some of the reactions of fellow students. "Come and have a look," said the young man. In spite of some of them being interested enough to say they might keep chickens some day, Koen fears that his hobby will one day be gone.

## Koen van Ouwenhuysen

Koen van Ouwenhuysen is a young Belgian fancier who lives in the little Belgium village of Gierle. At just 22 years of age, he has kept chickens since 1999 when his grandmother's neighbour died, leaving a pen of Malines. When Koen said he would like to have the birds, his grandparents offered him a piece of their yard to build a chicken house. After a short while, he realised his new flock was not particularly good so he sought advice from Jos Agemans, a neighbouring chicken fancier. Jos advised Koen to get rid of the Malines and get some different fowls. Jos was







a Marans breeder, and Koen also decided to keep Marans as he thought they were beautiful birds. Time passed and one day at the Grobbendonk market he purchased a pen of real Pénédès, which had come straight from Spain. He remembered that Jos had several Pénédès and he remembered something else... Jos also had some fine Marans bantams. After some negotiation, the Spanish Pénédès were exchanged and Koen became the proud owner of Marans bantams.

Koen admits that since 2002 he has been a fanatic. "I became a member of 't Pluiske, the local club of Dessel and in 2003 I was already a board member. In 2005 I became secretary. "So, as the other members said, 'we can go on for years now,' as I am far and away the youngest there. I help around as much as I can, including setting up and taking down cages at the show." Unfortunately, in 2003 Koen's grandparents passed away and he was forced to move his flock to new pens built on his parent's property.



**Photos: Left above: Marans bantams in various colours.**

**Right and below left: Marans bantams, a pullet and a cockerel in black copper.**



### **The Marans bantam**

The Marans is a French breed and has its origin around the marine town of Marans in the province Charente Maritime. In 1948 the first Marans bantams were created in England by Ken J. Bosley from Wantage, however these had clean legs, and came in the cuckoo variety only. In Holland, feather-legged Marans bantams were not recognised. In the neighbouring countries of Luxembourg, Belgium and France they were recognised, but did not exist. In 1988 Dirk de Jong, then secretary of the Dutch Breeders' Club of French poultry breeds, together with several other breeders, began creating 'real' Marans bantams in Holland. After six years of selective breeding they had two fine strains of the



black copper and cuckoo varieties. In 1994 the Marans bantam was recognised in Holland, in the black-copper variety only; the Dutch Standard Committee believed the cuckoo coloured hens were too dark in colour to be acceptable.

Marans bantams are docile and friendly, but are still quite active foragers. Large Marans tend to be even more placid than the bantams, however this always depends on how well the birds are treated. The males are not aggressive towards their keepers and are rather tolerant among each other. In the pen they are quite chivalrous toward the hens, always leaving the choicest morsels of food for them, and carefully selecting the best nesting boxes.

The laying ability of the bantams is very good, even better than that of large Marans, however the egg colour isn't the required dark brown, which is the reason for the large Marans' popularity.



After two years of intensively selecting for plumage colours and marking needed to get the breed recognised – the dark brown egg colour was lost. Today the cuckoo bantams have the best egg colour. Marans lay in both summer and winter, without

requiring extra lighting. They tend to go broody (especially Dirk de Jong's strain) and make very good mothers.

The Marans bantams have the same standard and varieties as the large fowls, with the only difference being for size. A fairly large bantam, it has a deep, broad breast and a rather long body. The hen is smaller than the cock, with a more rounded body, straighter back line and well developed abdomen. They give an impression of strength without being heavy and awkward. All Marans have single combs, bright red-orange eyes and red earlobes. The tail is quite short, carried well up without going past 45°. The legs and feet are white or lightly pink coloured for all the varieties, except for the black, black silver and black copper Marans, these being grey or dark grey. The skin is white. The legs and outer toes are sparsely feathered, as in the original French type.



In the Netherlands, the brown red variety (more correctly known as black copper or coppery black) is still the only recognised colour in Marans bantams. Hackles, back, shoulders and saddle are marked with bright copper red, and the breast



may also have some red marking. The remaining plumage is black. The hens are black with copper coloured neck feathers. Marans Bantams are also bred in Germany, where the black copper variety has been recognised since 1999. In Belgium cuckoo, white, black and black copper varieties are recognised. Interest in Marans bantams in France is increasing and they are recognised in the same colours as large Marans: silver cuckoo, golden cuckoo, black, white, black copper, black silver, columbian, wheaten and black-tailed buff (though it is doubtful that all those varieties actually exist). Marans bantam are of somewhat inferior quality in France, so hatching eggs are often purchased abroad.

**Right: Red and yellow Smerle of Flanders.**



**Above: The Bosvoorde bantam is the rumples variety of the Watermaal bearded bantam.**



#### **Koen on his birds**

Koen said it is often claimed the Marans is 'only a farmer's breed'. "But still, we are farmers and this is simply my favourite breed. When I get more breeds in my pen, that's alright, but the Marans are here to stay," he says. Koen said that Marans are often judged by people not familiar with the breed and combined with the lack of a standard description for the breed, found that judges make broad statements like, "too large; too heavy; the French standard description has better guidelines on that," or they complain about feather sheen and leg colour.

Koen is young and enthusiastic about his hobby. In his yard many bantams in recognised and experimental colours forage freely. The whites and cuckoos came from Dirk de Jong in the Netherlands. There are several black silvers which he bought two years ago at a show in Beernen. They were fairly good quality and he has since bred some



young birds from them. This variety is extremely vital, being less susceptible to Infectious Coryza (Roup). The black-silvers are not yet recognised in Belgium, but they have been shown for several years.

Koen has recently started with quail coloured Bosvoorde bearded bantams. He says they are difficult to breed, being a rumpless chicken. This means that the vertebrae of the tail and the tail feathers are missing. The Bosvoorde bearded bantam is the rumpless variety of the Watermael bearded bantam. "This year I had only one chicken and they don't lay very well," he said. "The cock is fiery enough though! Hopefully I'll manage to breed some more next year. The Bosvoorde is a real Belgian breed, and although I think the Watermael bearded bantam is the most beautiful of all the Belgian breeds, I have chosen the Bosvoorde because it is so rare. Only a few breeders in Belgium keep them."

He also keeps red and yellow Smerle of Flanders pigeons. They are quite calm pigeons that he allows to fly free except on Saturdays and Sundays. "There are many homing pigeons around then and my birds lose their way as soon as they are over the fence," he said. "Sometimes one of them ends up at another fancier's loft but with some sweet talking I can usually get my pigeon back. If not, when one of his homers alights at my lofts I will eat it!" he laughed.

Luckily Koen has a good relationship with his neighbours. He says he does have one who complains about the crowing occasionally. "I'll slaughter some cocks and give him one, or give him some eggs. That always does the trick and keeps him quiet for a while," Koen said. He also keeps several chickens at a friend's property, as a security measure from diseases and predators.



**Right above: A cockerel and pullet in the (not recognised) variety black-silver. The plumage of the cockerel is not complete and the saddle hackles could show more silver.**

**Left: a blue-copper pullet.**



### **Breeding and keeping**

Koen makes no secret of which colour is his favourite. "Breeding the blue copper Marans bantam is my dream. Blue is such a lovely colour... also in pigeons and rabbits," he enthused.

Two years ago he started creating the blue variety by crossing a black copper bantam cock with a large blue hen. The pullets were mated to their sire and the cockerels were discarded. Koen now has several very good blue copper hens with good colour and size, as he has found the bantam size to be dominant.

Another unusual colour is the white copper. When Koen lacked a white bantam male, he mated a black copper cock to white bantam hens he got from Dirk de Jong. The offspring were mostly white, but after mating the pullets to the black copper cock, he got white copper chicks. Some are very white but some are 'splashed'. Koen is working to refine the white colour over the next few years in the hope he can get them recognised. The black silver variety is not yet approved and needs work to eliminate the gold impurity often found in the hackles of the males.



**Above right: A blue-copper pullet with nice plain blue colour and broad plumage.**



**Left and right below: Golden cuckoo bantam cocks, another variety not yet recognised in bantams.**



Koen's black copper bantams are real show quality. The first year he bred them they were very good, but the following year the quality seemed to slip badly. This year his birds have shown great improvement. "I have at least two top hens," he says with a broad smile. Next year Koen intends setting up a cockerel-breeding pen, as he believes he knows which combination will give better cocks: the reddest cock (not orange) mated to red hens with shorter tails. Koen does not select for egg colour, but he does select for laying proficiency, as he believes this is more important. This year he hatched 350 chicks in his own incubator.

Koen's birds are fed pellets, and in late summer they are given some cracked grain, to slow down the lay so that they keep their condition longer during the show season.

### **Showing**

Two years ago Koen started his own business, so he finds it harder to find the time for exhibitions. He still manages to show his birds six or seven times a year, particularly at the annual show of the Marans Breeders Club, the Provincial Show and the National Show. He also makes time for his own club show in Dessel and



a few other local shows. In December he plans to enter some bantams at the first 'Kempenshow'; a combination show of six local clubs in the District of Antwerp. Koen finds it disappointing that more and more of the big shows are vanishing. "What can we do to revive interest in our hobby?" he asks.

"In Belgium we have just one coordinating union, so only one membership card is needed to show and you can enter poultry, pigeons and rabbits. Compared to the Netherlands, where a separate membership for every union is required, this is really 'lowering the threshold'." Koen said.

The Marans bantam does not often win 'Best in Show', however Koen has been club champion twice and has held the honour of being national champion of the Marans breed. Koen does not exhibit white Marans and says grooming the other colour varieties is not very laborious; washing the feet and dressing the comb and faces generally suffices.



**Above and left: on his way to creating white copper; vital birds with strong and broad feathers. They still have a lot of splash and the coppery hackles of the hen should be more intense in colour.**

Two years ago Koen began judging studies and today he is qualified to judge large and bantam Marans. He says he wants to only judge those breeds he is interested in, particularly Belgian breeds.

"The real hobby is right here at home in the chicken pens," he said. "That is the most pleasant part of it."

Koen is correct. No matter how busy we are with any kind of

hobby-related 'business', the true base of our hobby is in the pens indeed!

Thank you Koen, for your hospitality. With your enthusiasm and determination we're sure you will go on to become a great poultry judge.