

# THE COLOUR OF THE RHODE ISLAND RED

By: Rem Koster



During the past 40 years Dutch breeders have made good progress in breeding Rhode Island Reds. In this article I will try to describe the colour of our Reds from head to tail, and how to successfully breed them.

## The origin of the red colour in our Rhode Island Red

As Red breeders know, the plumage colour of the Rhode Island Red should be the bright deep red that was inherited from the Red Malay. In olden times merchant ships sailed from Rhode Island to the Pacific. On their way back the sailors brought chickens for food and often birds were left over when they arrived home in America, and among those were red cocks from India.

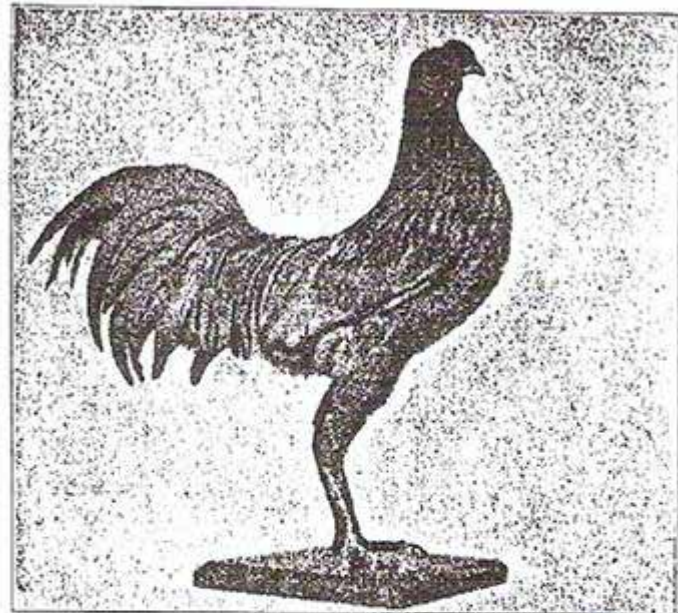
American farmers crossed these birds with their own fowl, resulting in hardy birds laying brown eggs and very useful for meat. These qualities were put down to the imported red cocks.

Red was known to be one of the strongest colours, so farmers assumed that red coloured fowls would be stronger and more fertile than other colours. So they asked the ships' captains to bring back more red cocks in order to breed in more and more of the red genes and finally embed the red colour.

One farmer in those days was John Macomber and his name was given to the first really good red hen, called the Macomber hen. This hen is considered the "mother" of all Rhode Island Red strains.

One of the first Red Malay cocks was stuffed and displayed in the Salem Museum in Rhode Island. (See picture at the right)

According to the Dutch text below the picture, this cock was brought from East India in 1846 by Captain Richard Wheatland and was used in breeding RIR for three years. The bird had yellow legs, a pea comb and an all over red plumage, except for two white flights in one wing.

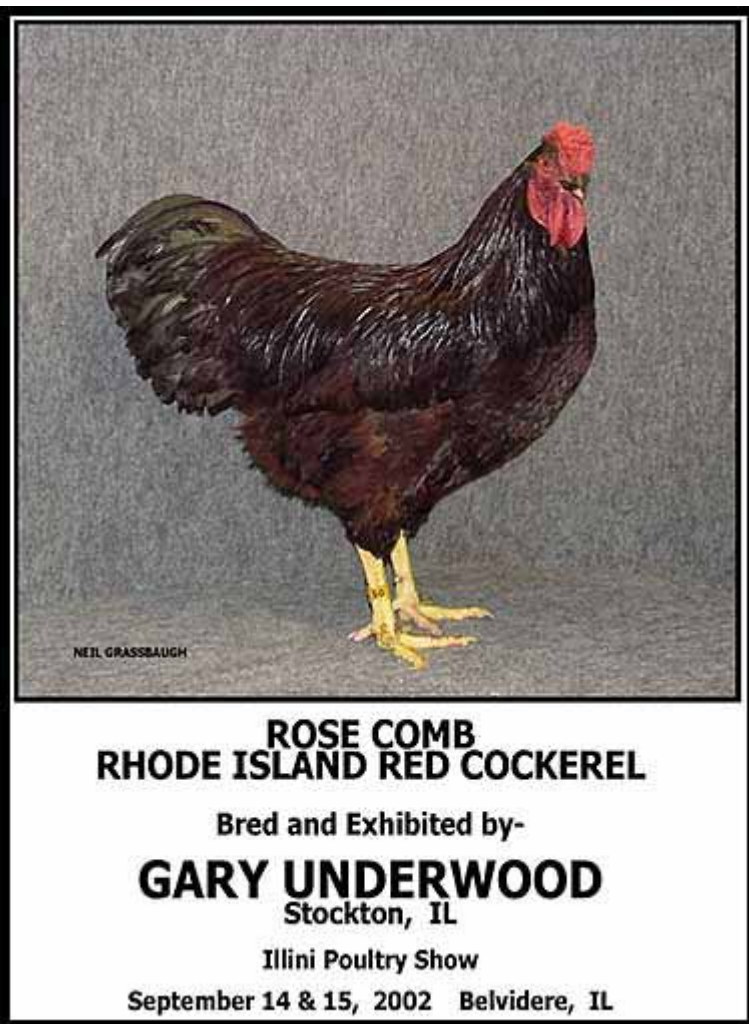


## ROODE MALEIER VECHTHAAN.

*Dr. Woods fotografeerde dezen haan in het Museum van de Peabody Academy of Science, East India Marine Hall te Salem in Massachusetts, waar hij opgezet bewaard wordt. Deze vogel werd in 1846 door kapitein Richard Wheatland uit Indië meegebracht en werd in Salem voor de fokkerij gebruikt gedurende een tijdperk van ongeveer drie jaar, door een verwant, een zekeren Mr. George Wheatland Jr. Deze vogel had gele beenen en een erwtenkam. Het dier was over het geheele lichaam gelijkmatig, diep rood gekleurd, behalve in één vleugel, welke wit in twee der groote slagpennen vertoonde.*

The type of this Red Malay resembled a Shakebag cock. It was later established that mostly Chittagong, Cochin-China, Red Malay and Red Java were used. Initially the RIR were called '*Golden Buffs*' but later that was changed to '*Rhode Island Reds*'.

So the main colour of the birds was red, with orange and black as secondary colours. For over 50 years these breeds were crossed together, with no other purpose than to gain a strong, hardy chicken with excellent laying ability. The result was a hodgepodge of combinations of these three ground colours, over which the red was always predominate. Only in 1898 at the founding of the 'Rhode Island Red Club of America' the leading breeders of those days started to meld the three common colours into one harmonic colour. So began the true RIR colour.



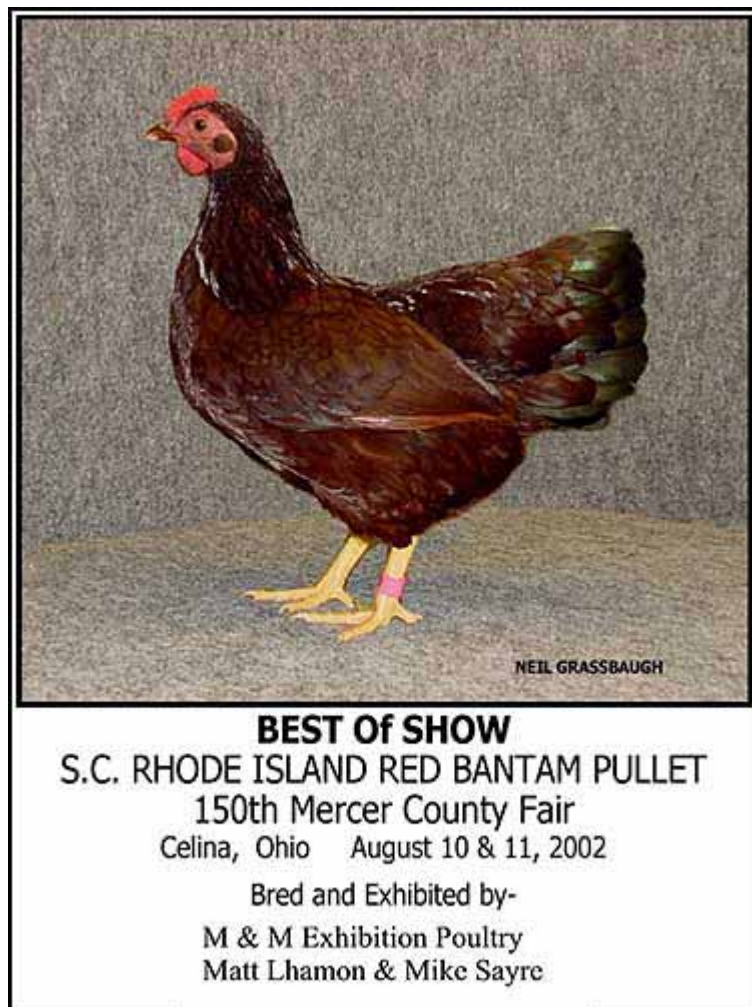
Above and right: A prize winning American Rhode Island Red and Rhode Island Red bantam. Photos courtesy of the American RIR Club.

**What should this unique red colour look like?**

How can we obtain this fine deep red colour and hold its hue? Well, this is achieved with inbreeding and line-breeding.

Today our RIR have an even red colour from head to tail. The colour hue differs though among the various strains of different breeders. If you look from a distance at a row of RIRs the difference in colour hue tells you they come from different breeders. The Standards of Perfection doesn't describe a specific 'red'; rather, it simply demands an even, deep red colour. Nowadays the uniform red colour achieved in the 'superior' RIR strains is the result of years of patient and conscientious inbreeding and line-breeding.

Of the three above-mentioned colours, red is the most dominant. Black is also a strong colour; not as strong as red, though stronger than orange. By systematic



combining of the three colours, red turned out the most dominant. Influences from the black and orange are noticeable, but are 'covered up' by the red. The variations between different strains result from breeders mating their favourite coloured birds year after year, creating their own individual colour. Just as the red colour is made today, the same inbreeding and line breeding methods will need to be used in the future.

**Right: A Dutch Rhode Island Red bantam cock, with an ideal colour.**

First, let's discuss the desired red colour, and then describe what is definitely not wanted. Ideally, we want an even, dark, rich shade of red colour all over; in neck, shoulders and breast. The under-colour should also be rich, deep red, only slightly lighter than the surface colour. The black markings must also be correct; in the neck hackle and tail feathers of the hens, and in the main tail feathers, sickles and tail coverts of the cock. Both hens and cocks have black markings in the wing feathers.



For the full description, please read the Standard of Perfection; this article deals with excess or misplaced black and will be also shown in the pictures. Again, a slightly lighter or darker colour hue at the different strains is not at all a problem, as long as we are aware of things that can go wrong.

**Allow me to point out what we absolutely DON'T want:**

1. Ground colour.

A dull, hard ground colour is not at all appreciated. A dark ground colour often brings a loose feather structure and narrow or stringy feathers, a nasty side effect that is very hard to get rid of. So it is advisable to breed our RIR in a one or two shades lighter ground colour, to prevent this nasty fault.

Fortunately, the fault of uneven coloured plumage, or different shades of red in the different body parts, is hardly seen in our birds. You should select for even plumage, as uneven coloured birds won't win Best of Show!

A few years back I met with a young breeder whose pullets had too light breast colour compared to the rest of the body. After searching his breeding pens we found one hen with this problem; obviously the mother of the pullets. Birds with too light breast colour should be excluded from the breeding pens and the showroom.

**Below: A Bantam hen with an even and intense colour, also in the wings.**

2. Black in the plumage.



Older hens often have black tipped feathers at the shoulders or other parts of the plumage. This is a major fault, often seen with uneven ground colour. This kind of bird can be used in the breeding pen but not in the showroom. Old hens don't always develop excessive black though... some years ago a three year-old hen from my pens got a very good judge's report and gained 'Outstanding' – 96 points. So as you see, quality 'old' hens are possible, but you need to check for unwanted black before entering at the show.

3. Neck colour.

The neck should be the same shade as the rest of the body. Sometimes the neck is a lighter colour; this is a hereditary fault. Often the reverse side of the neck feathers is a lighter shade, leaning to orange or lemon colour. If so, be extra careful when having such hens in the breeding pen; as long as they don't give offspring with orange colour in the upper sides of the neck feathers its okay, but keep a close eye!

The cocks want a 'clean' neck; a rich deep red colour without any sign of black marking. When the cockerels are young they may show some black in the neck, but when fully developed they should have cleaned up, or absorbed the smut to be clean and deep in colour. The lower neck feathers should be completely free of black.

This is different in the hens where the neck feathers of the female – especially the lower ones – should reveal a beetle green tip, called 'ticking'. We often see

Red females with excess black, running up to about a half to two inches in length from the tip of their hackle feathers. This is not what we want.

On the other hand there are RIR hens – especially bantams – that don't have any black ticking at all. Of course this is also no good.

It must sometimes be very hard for a judge to cut this type of female, but in fact birds like



this should not be placed in the champion's row. Winning with such birds only encourages their use in the breeding pen.

#### 4. Tail.

Something we often see – especially in the lighter coloured birds – is red lacing or red downwards to the skin on the inside tail feathers. This should not be, as the Standard demands a solid black feather. Only the upper two tail feathers are allowed to have any red lacing.



**Above: Hen tail; ideal shape and colour.**



**We strive to get intense black-coloured tail feathers.**

**Right: Cock tail; very good shape and ideal colour and sheen.**

#### 5. Wings.

The black wing markings are often an obstacle in breeding reds. Perfect markings are not always attainable, but there is a compromise. If we stick to the Standard there aren't too many problems in the cocks, as their black markings are mostly as called for in the Standard. However, in the hens we see problems more often; black feather tips, peppering on the wrong side of the feather quill or black on both sides of the vane are 'common' faults.



The cleverest thing to do is try to breed black markings that are not too heavy, but just enough to be acceptable. Just so long as there is some black in the wings.

So our advice is to not exaggerate black in the wings of the hens as it will give the above-mentioned problems.

6. Black (smoke) and/or grey (smut) in the under colour.

Nowadays this problem is not often seen in RIR in Dutch showrooms, but every now and then there are birds that must be cut down in ranking because of this fault. Because this fault is not often seen, we run the risk of becoming complacent. Before entering birds in a show, you should check them thoroughly, by lifting the feathers and inspecting the down. If only a few feathers have smut you could pull them out (if you note the leg band number in your records you won't get any 'surprises' later when using the bird in the breeding pen). In the case of excessive smut it is better to not enter the bird as it will most certainly be judged as 'Insufficient'.

The intensity of the under colour can differ between birds. Where one bird can be a warm red colour, another can be dull. The warm red colour is preferable, also in the down.



**Above: Feathers with the unwanted smoke/smut in the undercolour.**

7. The colour of the abdomen.

Another thing appearing more and more lately is the abdomen colour being noticeably lighter in colour than the rest of the body. This is mostly seen in Red bantams from the strains of breeders that prefer a lighter colour hue. While it is understandable to breed RIR with slightly lighter red colour as it is the best way to gain proper feather structure, we should strive to obtain an even shade of colour over the body, including the abdomen. Just another point of interest!



## Inbreeding and line-breeding

As mentioned earlier, inbreeding and line-breeding are the only ways to avoid all those nasty faults. There is sound argument for a non-related cross, as this gives very strong and vital birds indeed, however the best results on improving colour (and also type, but that will be discussed in another article) can only be gained by selective mating of chickens from the same strain. Other methods will only bring disappointment. Mating birds of unknown pedigree, with different colour hues of red and brown, will only rarely give offspring of even colour. When those chickens also have smut or black in the fluff, it is understandably extra difficult to get good offspring.

History says that Edward Macomber first bred Reds in a scientific way, according to Mendel's Law. By systematically mating his first hen with her sons and grandsons the perfect, even red colour was fixed for subsequent generations and maintained to this day.



S. C. RHODE ISLAND REDS

Copyright, 1914, Pacific Telephone, Mount Morris, Ill

**Above: Rhode Island Red painted by A. Schilling.**

All modern prominent strains are bred the same way – mothers mated to their sons and fathers to their daughters. But this is not enough. The related chickens must be as strong and vital as possible and be able to pass on good characteristics in a proper way. They must also be of outstanding type and have the desired colour hue. In other words, the most important thing in breeding RIR is to learn how to make up compensating matings. We will explain to you in the following example.

A cockerel becomes Champion at several different shows, but 'technically' he is only a 'chance hit' in the breeding pen. He has little value as a sire, except when he is mated to his own offspring. In this way, his positive qualities are inherited by over 75 per cent of his subsequent offspring, IF there was careful selection.

Strict and careful selection is needed as inbreeding results in undesirable traits as well as the good qualities.

When the above-mentioned champion cockerel is mated to non-related hens, his superior qualities will only be inherited by a few of his offspring.



To summarise... the surface colour should be a deep, rich red that it is dark and bright, without losing the red hue in either sunlight or shade. The surface colour should also match the under colour. There is not 'my' colour, or 'your' colour, or even the colour of the Dutch Rhode Island Red Club, rather it is a logical result of combining three ground colours – orange, black and red – by inbreeding and line-breeding, melding them into one harmonic colour that is unique for each strain.

**Left: ideal feather colour at a hen.**

Let's look at some possible Red combinations:

1. Dark surface colour that looks like black chocolate even in sunlight. By contrast, the under colour is five tones lighter.
2. Light surface colour, so dull and lacking all brightness and sheen, also with pale under colour.
3. A glossy, even deep and dark red surface colour, but with smut or smoke in the under colour.
4. A slightly lighter red surface, but lively, bright and glossy; the colour being completely even from head to tail and the down as rich and deep in colour as the surface colour.

**Right: Excellent wing marking.**

According to the Dutch Rhode Island Red Club, the fourth colour is what we should aim for. Through the years this has been proven to be a sound colour, obtained by careful selection, inbreeding and line-breeding.



Fortunately the first three colour combinations no longer occur in such extreme form as depicted here. Getting and maintaining the correct intensity of the red surface colour has improved the overall quality of Reds.

Breed with related birds and continue on for at least six generations, rather than hoping for the odd 'topper'. This will surely bring you the desired colour results... correct colour in all parts of the plumage, from head to tail and completely even, just as we want it to be, with a rich under colour free from any smut and matching the surface colour.



### **Finally...**

The article 'Chicken Run' in our August issue mentioned WHITE Rhode Island bantams. Some years ago I learned from my close contacts with the Rhode Island Red Club of America that there never has been a white variety in Rhode Island Red fowls. There IS a Rhode Island White though, but that is a different breed and never has been under the flag of the Red Club. On the contrary, the present board of the American Rhode Island Red Club have never seen a Rhode Island White in the flesh (and doesn't want to either). The fact that the white variety is recognised in the Dutch Poultry Standard is ridiculed and they say it should not be allowed. That is why the Dutch RIR Club requested their Standard Committee to reconsider, which they did, although the white variety was said to be maintained 'for while longer' because there are still white bantams here. Some day soon there will be a change in the Standard, as agreed.

#### *Added by the editor:*

The Rhode Island White was admitted to the American Standard of Perfection in 1922. It is a white breed of Rhode Island Red type and was produced from crosses of Partridge Cochins, White Wyandottes and Rose Comb White Leghorns. (Source: The National Geographic Magazine, April 1927)

They are now believed to be extinct. What has been show in the US lately is a Plymouth Rock/Wyandotte cross, having no resemblance of RI type. (Source: Forum RIRclub USA)



However, in Australia the Rhode Island Whites are becoming quite common. Greg Davies, our Australian editor, sent us this photo of a R.I.White hen with the following remark: "The quality is very good too, with the females especially equalling the Reds for type (and in some cases, exceeding them)".

**Left: This picture of a Rhode Island White hen was taken at a local show in Australia. Photo: Greg Davies**