

# CHICKEN RUN

## THE CHICKENS AT HENK MEIJER'S

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Photos: Aviculture Europe**

According to Henk Meijers in Groesbeek, breeding chicken can be a surprising hobby. A rare genetic factor popped up in his chickens – being the dun factor. This factor is known in various kinds of pets and agricultural breeds, even the Muscovy duck. With this colour gene you can change the black to brown in all chicken breeds. So far no breed in this colour is recognised in the Dutch Poultry Standard. Perhaps Henk can change that.

### **Henk Meijers**

Henk Meijers lives in his parental home, the cradle of his father's family. All members of both sides of his family had great affection for animals, compared to that Henk is only temperate, he says. His father used to keep all sorts of birds, partly for ornamental value, but also for earning some extra money. "Chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, peafowl; all were free ranging in the yard and bred in the adjoining wilderness, very impressive in the eyes of a child," Henk remembers, "But when my father died at an early age, the larger birds were sold and the poultry grew old and slowly disappeared."

**Right: Free ranging chickens. There are five 15-year-old deer too.**

At the age of 14 years Henk began keeping animals – rabbits, ornamental ducks, and chickens. He collected several breeds from



neighbours, but as he had no incubator, the breeding results were too low to be 'serious' breeding. The show results with the rabbits were disappointing, so he decided to part with the chickens and rabbits and apply himself to the ornamental ducks. Henk says, "They are such nice birds, but I was really too young. My day started with checking if all the pairs were still intact as I had every kind of predator there.



"When I finished my studies in biotechnology/chemistry I had to enlist and I sold my ducks – except my 'cross-bred experiment' – being a cross between Call duck and Laysan teal. I hoped to create a very tiny duck breed, sort of teal in mallard colour. But while I was away on duty, a buzzard took my best duck and so I parted with everything. As you see, I already had the 'drive to create' back in those days, although it needed concrete plans, based on solid facts."

**Above: Frizzle Japanese bantam. Right: Columbia Wyandotte hen and a Silver Hamburg cock.**



**Next: A Vorwerk bantam hen, a Silver Partridge Dutch Bantam cock and a Porcelain hen.**



### **The chickens**

Many years later he again decided to keep some and first properly plant

This interest developed into another hobby – collecting various tree species.

He began planting a forest at a waste part of their fields and later the focus of the collection shifted to bamboo and other exotic plants. Only when that project was well underway he was ready for something new. His cousin, a Japanese bantam breeder, took him to a large poultry exhibition and within two months he had built a chicken run.

The initial birds (also turning out to be the foundation stock of both 'new colours') were bought at a market in St. Antonis.

birds. This time he had to do it right researched things like how to a duck run.

Henk says, "I intended to buy a few 'ordinary' Columbian Wyandottes, but my cousin advised me to take another walk around and not look so eager; that would lower the price. We also walked past a lot of blue partridge Dutch Bantams. Well, the Wyandottes were sold immediately and also the Dutch Bantams were gone when we returned, so I had to choose from what was left in the market. After all, the new chicken house NEEDED chickens and preferably TODAY, I think you know the feeling... A local market isn't an

exhibition so the selection was limited. Finally I decided to buy a trio of Rosecombs in blue tailed buff colour – as I thought. And I was attracted to a little Vorwerk bantam, being rather small compared to the others, but she later turned out to be a perfect pullet!”

**Right: One of the Rosecomb bantams from which he bred the fawn silver duckwing colour.**

In the mean time Henk got some Japanese Bantams from his cousin, but he preferred fowls like Lakenvelder and colourful Dutch Bantams. His neighbour arranged some Lakenvelder for him and the partridge Dutch Bantams came from a local breeder.

The Rosecomb bantam cock died before giving offspring and Henk decided to house the two hens with the Dutch Bantams; maybe this was a chance to get the Blue Partridge Dutch Bantams that he missed at the market. Surprisingly however, the offspring weren't blue but a strange chocolate brown colour.

Henk says, “The first time I saw this colour I



knew this was something new. My cousin, who is a skilled poultry breeder, just could not understand why this colour never popped up before.”

**Left: A Dutch bantam cockerel in the new colour Fawn Silver Duckwing; the dun factor diluted the black feathers to a brown tint.**

“I had not bought a matching cock for the Vorwerk hen, so it was up to me whether I should buy one or mate her to some other breed or colour.



Obviously I could try to make a blue variety, but those already existed, as far as I knew and white markings in a buff ground colour, such as in Chamois Wyandottes, were much to my liking.

**Left: A Pile Dutch Bantam cock was used to create the White patterned Vorwerk bantams.**

"The best thing would be to mate that with a dominant white and I knew that some of the Pile coloured Dutch Bantams have that dominant white colour gene, although they often are splash/diluted blue.

In an Internet advertisement I found a 'surplus' pile Dutch Bantam and I was lucky: he turned out to have the dominant white gene and

in the first generation (F1) the white patterned Vorwerk bantams were born."



### **Breeding and Keeping**

Today Henk has 19 chicken runs, 11 chick houses, a proper incubator and some 10 breeds in even more colours. On average he breeds with 12 breeding pens. The selected breeding birds preferably have no serious faults and must carry the genes that he needs for the specific aim. And as to what that aim is, he does not choose the easiest path – he aims for perfect birds in standard colours as well as for equivalent birds in new colours.



Henk explains, "That is a necessity, as without decent results at the shows, no one will take you seriously as a breeder".

"The new colours are very important to me though as I am curious to know how the colour genes work. From time to time I even do crossings just to learn from the outcome, although I would not recommend that, as the results are quite diverse – there simply are too many possibilities," Henk continues.

"A whole universe of colours is possible, and yet I prefer the contrasting black-and-white of the Lakenvelder, the silver

Braekel and the Silver spangled Hamburg. The partridge varieties of the Dutch bantam are smashing too. Furthermore I am against breeding separate lines for cockerels and pullets. Being ONE breed, what good is it to need a sub-breed for breeding the desired cockerels? I hope to prove that this is not necessary."

**Above: The enormous chicken house with roofed-over run. Inside are many separate pens.**

**Right: Wheaten Dutch Bantams in one of those inside pens.**



All breeding is done with the incubator, although each year he has one 'planned' broody, just for pleasure. This year he bred about 250 chicks.

"The reality is each year 50 more – while the wish is 50 less," he laughs.



The large runs are covered up with netting, to protect from birds of prey (see picture left). Even so, he still loses some stock to goshawks. Recently a storm blew a hole in the netting and the next day a goshawk took a Lakenvelder cock. Yet while the local crows are breeding or have young in the neighbourhood, the birds of prey cannot approach unseen – he often sees buzzards being chased away by crows. Of course crows can also take chicks or eggs, but his chicks are not allowed out in runs without covering; in fact they are not allowed out before they are three to four months old and then only if the weather is good. Last year was very wet, so most young birds are in separate

pens inside the large chicken house.

Rapeseed straw and hemp straw are used as litter; the latter being more expensive but also less dusty.

The birds are fed each morning with pellets for free range chickens. Feeding and watering are carried out manually each day. In the afternoon all feeders are covered up against mice and other pests.



**Left: Simple waterers made from three empty yogurt bins, the handles twisted together; this makes them very stable when filled with water).**

**Below right: A steamer works wonders against red mite, but you do need to have electricity at the spot. Most night houses in the runs are made of concrete-plex and (almost) crack and chink free. The roost unit is free from the walls and can easily be taken outside and made mite-free if needed.**



### **Henk on his chickens**

Henk has also purchased several chickens via the internet. Buying at an exhibition can be difficult, because sometimes you are not allowed to take the birds home before the end of the show, except the chickens in the "For Sale" corner, but those have no judge report.

At the moment he has Lakenvelder in large fowl and bantam, Black and White, Blue and White and soon Brown (Dun) and White; Silver Braekel; Hamburgh in large fowl and bantam, both Silver Spangled and he is working on Gold White Spangled; Watermael Bearded and Antwerp Bearded bantams in Quail and Silver Quail; Dutch Bantams in Partridge, Blue Partridge, Rosecomb bantams in Porcelain and Buff; Silver partridge, Fawn Silver Duckwing, Salmon, Creele and Pile; Japanese Bantam in mottled, also in frizzle; and a few Wyandotte, Rhode Island Reds and Groninger Meeuw hens.



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**Left: Lakenvelder and Hamburghs in one of the inside chicken pens.**



**Above: Silver Braekel in one of the spacious outside runs.**

Although having many breeds, he still notices differences in character. Japanese cockerels for instance are not very aggressive, but they can be stubborn. Lakenvelder can get very tame in the pens but when running wild, they are shy and difficult to approach. Braekels are the opposite – at a distance they stay calm but when approached they panic. Even so, his Braekel chicks are rather tame. His Hamburgs and bantams are very tame – only the Rhode Island Red bantams are more tame (almost too tame, walking in front of your feet), and the cocks not aggressive at all. This is very different to the Dutch Bantam and Rosecomb cocks. The large Hamburgs need a lot of space.

Especially the 'broad' hens go broody; also some colour varieties of the Dutch Bantam. Hamburg and Lakenvelder are the best layers. Lakenvelder are pleasant birds to keep, although raising the chicks can sometimes be difficult. Dutch Bantam chicks can also be difficult to raise.

When asked what he does with surplus cockerels, he answers with a wink, "I have a good address for surplus neighbours, though it is a pity that keeping cocks seems to be the new 'mortal sin' in today's society."

**Right: Henk standing at the border of the 'jungle' with behind him some of the bamboos.**

### **Another hobby**

Henk calls his collection of plants and trees his 'jungle'. And even in mid-winter, everything is still green enough to give that impression – the Bamboos and Giant Sequoia are imposing by their height. Still in summer this must be much more impressive, when the Banana tree is out of its winter protection wrapping, the Paulownia grows its spectacular large leaves and the Dove tree and Judas tree are blooming again (you can enjoy the



fantastic pictures at his website).

The plants flourish on the chicken manure and he has two wheelbarrows of it each week.

Besides the chickens and trees, Henk also collects music, mostly hard rock and guitar music, he visits internet forums on plants, chicken and chicken genetics and he has a website about his hobbies.



**Left: In this picture the difference between black and dun is clear to see.**

### **Showing**

Henk is a member of the NHDB (Dutch Poultry Union) and the local club KV Edelras in Groesbeek. He has attended several shows with success, although he has not yet entered birds at a National Show.

He refuses to wash chickens for show, as he believes a decent land fowl like Lakenvelder should not need it. Just the legs are cleaned and combs and wattles brightened up with oil. The Lakenvelder suffers from serious faults like spurs at the hens. The cocks' wattles and earlobes are often damaged by fighting, although these are minor faults. The hens often have some white feathers on the head and upper neck and in his opinion, the tail feathers are not always correctly positioned, and although the judge's reports never mention the tails, it still bothers him. The white plumage can go yellowish from sunlight, so he keeps his pullets inside and the cockerels under the shade of the trees. Yet his experience with judges is very positive – because the Lakenvelder is a rare breed, the judges mention the 'ideals' but praise the positive points, often ranking the bird 'Outstanding'. Now that is good judging.

For Henk, the spontaneous appearance of the dun colour has been most exciting.

"Now I feel obliged to create more chicken breeds with this colour, as no poultry breeds are recognised in dun, at least not in the Netherlands," he says.

**Right: One of the runs with 'reserve' cockerels of various breeds, many of them of show quality.**







### **To end with**

Henk is hopeful that other breeders will also start creating these two new colours in other breeds. He is more than happy for anyone to imitate his crossings – the more 'new blood' the better. Recognition of the dun character is most important in securing these colours, and as they are genetically dominant, can be simply crossed with 'black' varieties. By the end of next season he is confident of being able to distribute birds – and anyone interested in the White patterned Vorwerk bantams can seize the opportunity right now.

Board members of the Dutch bantam Club who have seen the Fawn Silver Duckwing birds, are very interested. They are waiting another year to see how the colour will breed true.

The Dutch Standard Committee will not recognise a new colour in a breed if that colour is not yet recognised in the land of origin, and unfortunately, the German Speciality Club of Vorwerk breeders has not (yet) replied to Henk regarding the white patterned Vorwerk.

So if you are looking for something special in your chicken runs, or interested in the recognition of these colours, please contact Henk.

After thanking Henk for his hospitality, we asked him to keep us informed about the new creations.

You can contact Henk through his website

[http://home.hetnet.nl/~h.meijers69/henk69\\_english.htm](http://home.hetnet.nl/~h.meijers69/henk69_english.htm) where you can find many more pictures of his wonderful jungle and his chickens.

In the below websites you can learn how the new colours were created:

<http://home.hetnet.nl/~h.meijers69/bruinzilverpatrijs.htm>

<http://home.hetnet.nl/~h.meijers69/witvorwerk.htm>