

NAKED NECKS

Text and photos: Bobo Athes (Romania)
Photo right: Klaas v. d. Hoek.

This unusual looking chicken breed has become popular worldwide, but its history has stirred - and continues to stir – numerous controversies. The lack of exact information regarding its creation (or at least its arrival in Eastern Europe) makes any attempt to clarify the origins of the breed even more difficult. Moreover, the particularity of its appearance, the same feature that provided the right name for the breed, that is the naked neck, even led to strange popular beliefs – the most surprising one being the hypothesis that the Naked Neck was created through crossing a chicken with a turkey.



First of all, this hybridization could not have taken place. Even if such a hybrid had been somehow created, it would have been sterile because of the genetic incompatibility between the two species.

Another peculiarity related to the history of the breed is the fact that it has been claimed by two different countries: Romania and Hungary. A source of confusion is the history of Romania itself, as Transylvania – a major part of the country, one of the three historical provinces – was at a certain moment part of the Austrian – Hungarian Empire. A clue on the true origins of the breed could be found in the fact that initially Romanians used to call these birds “Turkish chickens”. But then again, the Romanian common name for the Dutch Bantam is “American Chicken”, so I am not sure how trustworthy this “popular vision” of history really is. Romanian historical archives mention a Lady called Luiza Hohenberg from Siebenburgen - the German name for Transylvania, which is the western part of Romania - who was breeding and selecting Naked Necks in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most probably, countries like France, England, Germany and Austria began breeding Naked Necks using birds from her stock.



Naked-neck Madagascar Malay.

Left: Naked Neck Madagascar Malay, drawing by Finsterbusch.

Yet, the most common name for the breed is Transylvanian Naked Neck; that is why I am inclined to believe that Romanians were the ones

who actually created the breed. According to certain historians and poultry specialists, the first chickens with naked necks were brought from Asia towards the end of the nineteenth century B.C. by Hun conquerors.

Afterwards, the breed was selected and perfected by Transylvanian breeders (most of them located near the towns of Sibiu and Sighisoara, apparently) according to their own view on what it should look like. They managed to develop a bird that was in the same time designed for poultry shows, thanks to its never before seen characteristics, and one that could be used as a dual purpose breed. Both factors contributed to a rapid increase in popularity, and the newly-created Transylvanian Naked Neck was proudly exhibited at an international agricultural show held in Vienna in 1875. The birds caused quite a sensation (their owners, Szeremley and Hohenberg-Onderka both got the highest distinctions) and soon afterwards there were relatively large populations of Naked Necks in Romania, Hungary, Germany and Austria, and the breed began to be imported to other countries as well.

The Germans also had another interest in breeding Naked Necks: the birds were not sensitive to extreme temperatures, and Germany needed to find ways to feed its troops in Africa; as a result, even before World War I, they experimented with several chicken breeds. Because of the extreme heat and humidity, only one breed managed to survive – in the same time producing eggs and quality meat: Transylvanian Naked Necks.



Left:
Naked Necks by
Teodor Pascal
1905. They
came in single
comb and rose
comb. It is
almost certain
that the first
Naked Necks,
showed in
Vienna, were
cuckoo coloured
birds with a
rose comb.

The first Romanian written standard was issued in 1905, and defined the Transylvanian Naked Neck as a dual-purpose breed in 3 colour varieties: white, black and barred. The qualities for which the new breed rose so much interest were vitality, resistance to extreme temperatures (cold and hot as well), good egg production (up to 170 in the first year), rapid growth and, last but not least, it was easy to pluck their feathers – this attribute making the breed particularly appealing for the farmers' wives.

Right: A pair of Blacks at a Romanian Show. The crop should be completely featherless in the male.



Naked Necks were usually bred on small farms, by people who did not know much about line breeding or scientific selection of the birds, that is why the gene pool eventually shrank and some of the productive features were lost along the way. Certain poultry researchers claim that some 40 years ago there were strains of Transylvanian Naked Neck whose egg production reached 200 in the first year, and this is unequalled by the present lines. Another phenomenon which took place was crossing Naked Necks with other breeds, which led to the disappearance of some bloodlines.

Another fact about the breed: the naked neck appears due to a particular gene that is why chickens with naked necks have appeared all over the world, 'by accident'. If there is a connection between this gene and the adaptation to a certain climate, then we have a good reason to believe that the first strains of this breed were developed in a hot climate. However, selective breeding managed to preserve the trait of the naked neck even in cold regions. The gene causing the naked neck is a dominant one, so even when crossed with a 'normally' feathered chicken, the trait will still be present in the first generation of chicks, but the crosses will usually have an 'extra - patch' of feathers on the neck. Pure-bred Naked Necks have absolutely no feathers on the neck, and just some feathers on the top of the head. The crop region is also featherless, and a distinct mark that the bird is a pure-bred. The same naked neck gene causes the plumage to be less dense on the breast and abdomen.

Right: Barred Naked Neck pullet from Australia, breeder F. Pyteltek, photo courtesy of Andy Vardy.



Recent experiments have shown that there is a direct relationship between the presence of the naked neck gene (Na) and the body weight of the birds – that is, the ones carrying this gene tend to be heavier and with less a smaller proportion of abdominal fat, when compared to the birds without the gene (normally feathered). This observation is especially valid in regions with higher temperatures, where the Na gene carriers utilize food more efficiently, have a better immune response to diseases and gain body weight faster than normally feathered birds.

Left: A Pair of Black Transylvanian Naked Neck at a Romanian Show.

There is also a connection between the Na gene and laying capacity. After experiments conducted in hot climates, it has been observed that after incorporating the Na gene into normally feathered birds, the egg weight increased. Even the difference between normal broilers and naked neck broilers is significant: the latter category uses food more efficiently, grows faster and is much more resistant to heat stress, due to the easier heat dissipation through the not-so-dense plumage. This practical advantage of the naked neck gene could lead to a renewed interest towards the Transylvanian Naked Neck breed as well, as pure-bred strains are now not only needed for showing or egg production, but also for their genetics.



Left:
Transylvanian
Naked Neck.
Photo: Wikipedia.

The birds have a well developed body, carried obliquely, with a rather elongated back and a deep breast. The male has nicely rounded sickles. The comb is simple; the wattles are red and rounded. The colour of the skin and legs varies from whitish to light-grey, but the Blacks and Blues have a leg colour close to black. A very important detail is the neck colour, which should be red (even though in females the shade of red might not be as intense as in the males). The

neck and head often become very bright red from increased sun exposure. The weight is most of the times between 2.5 and 3 kilos in males and 2 – 2.5 kilos in females. The hens are careful broodies and good mothers. The birds usually have a nice temperament and easily become tame. They reach maturity at about 6 months.

In Romania and Hungary the Naked Neck was being bred mainly as utility fowl, even though efforts were systematically made to conform to a certain standard regarding shape and size. Breeding programs were encouraged by various governmental institutions and agricultural organizations. Germany had a major contribution in designing a standard and breeding accordingly, while in the same

time promoting the breed through poultry shows and club meetings. Yugoslavia also had (and still does) large numbers of Naked Necks. Like the rest of the fancy, the Naked Neck breeding programs were severely affected by World War II, but after things got back to normal the Naked Neck populations slowly increased. Especially in Germany, because in Romania and Hungary the breed – mainly kept by small farmers, for eggs and meat – gradually got replaced by broilers, with better production qualities. Yet, in Romania many farmers kept crosses between Naked Necks and other breeds (including broilers, in fact), so the gene pool was not as severely affected as in Hungary.

Right: Head study of a black hen.

Below: Black Transylvanian Naked Neck hens.

This year, in Bucharest, a conference on Naked Neck breeding programs was held in order to encourage Romanian poultry keepers to choose it for their pens. At the moment, Romania only has approximately 200 pure-bred birds, mostly large fowl, but it seems like the interest for this breed is on the rise. This only means 200 birds that are registered, because there are breeders who do not show their birds and are not part of any poultry association, but they do have show-quality Naked Necks and have solid knowledge on breeding them. That is why I would not say that the Naked Neck is endangered.



From a cultural point of view, it is one of the few varieties of livestock with a name directly connected to the name of the country, which is why the Romanian government is trying to encourage the breeders of Naked Necks through financing and promotion. At present, the best sign of the Naked Neck being revived is their more and more intensive



use for modern poultry farms, farms that do not use batteries or cages, but the birds are free to roam and they are only fed naturally (this way, the companies can also benefit from the eco-labelling advantages). As they are not supposed

to use any drugs for their birds, these companies need to use breeds which are hardy and resistant to diseases, sudden changes in temperature and with good vigour and productive qualities. This is where the Transylvanian Naked Neck comes in handy – pure-breed or crosses, they offer all the necessary qualities for being the perfect free-range dual-purpose birds. As a plus, their meat is said to be extremely tasty.



Above and left: Naked neck crosses in France. Photo: Aviculture Europe.

Below right: Commercial Naked Neck cross. Photo courtesy SASSO, Service Commercial.

Left: A white Transylvanian Naked Neck cockerel.



Naked Necks – in Romanian: *Gât Golaș de Transilvania* - are almost always present at shows, usually in very good quality. Yet, although the present standard recognizes six colour varieties (black, white, blue, barred, red and buff), one can see only whites and blacks at most shows. The most recent addition to the colour varieties is the Light (Black White Columbia) Naked Neck.



Left: The bantam version is also becoming increasingly popular, especially in the mille-fleur variety.

Below: Frizzle - Naked Neck cross, exhibited at a local Romanian show.



However, there is a negative practice, at shows, to pluck the feathers from the crop region, and this means (besides the issue of cruelty to animals and causing an additional stress to the caged birds) that the birds do not come from pure bloodlines – or that the strain is of poor quality. Defects should be – like in any other case – bred out, not corrected “on the spot”, through this kind of interventions.

Left: Blue Naked Neck pullet, Dortmund Show (G) 2007. Photo: Klaas v.d. Hoek.



Left: White Naked Neck pullet. Noordshow (NL) 2006. Photo: Klaas v.d. Hoek.

No matter who actually created this special breed, or which were the initial reasons for its appearance, the result is a spectacular one, and this trait (the naked neck) has been recently used in other breeds as well, such as Silkies, Polish or Frizzles. These new creations always cause a stir at shows (and sometimes even heated debates), but let us not

forget about the pure breed. You may call it Transylvanian Naked Neck, Turken or what else, the birds are beautiful and productive, highly appreciated in Romania and elsewhere, and they certainly are worth breeding and showing.