

CHICKEN RUN



SILKIES at RON PELGROM's

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After 25 years breeding Silkies – with many ups and downs – Ron Kerkhof is once again one of the top breeders in the Netherlands.

Ron Pelgrom

The little village of Koudekerke is in the Province of Zeeland, close to the North Sea coast. Although the day of our visit was in autumn, it was a day with blue skies and abundant sunshine, even with the threat of stormy weather on the horizon. The garden in the back of the house is a delightful spot with chicken houses around the boundary. The house itself is also a beauty; completely rebuilt and restored and a perfect place to live with his wife and son.



Right: On arrival we were welcomed by the Mini Shetland Ponies of 'Stable Pelgrom'. Breeding these small horses is another Hobby of Ron.

After taking some photos we were invited inside for a cup of coffee and cake, and then Ron started to talk about the past



25 years. He used to keep over 200 (standard size) Bearded Silkies during that time – mainly Blacks, Whites and Buffs. He played a role in producing the Buffs and getting them to the stage of having them recognized by the Dutch Standard Committee. Unfortunately he was forced to move house and had to sell his chickens and by the time that he got resettled, he was really missing his Silkies.

He does not dwell on the past and the difficulties of getting started again, however after eight years, he has now succeeded in regaining his place at the top: at the recent Delta Show his Silkie cock was judged Best White bearded Silkie in Show.

A bit of history

Silkies are said to be a very old Chinese breed. The best known and most quoted reference to Silkies comes from the book *Il Milione* by Marco Polo –from his stay in China between 1272 and 1295. Describing the Realm of Fugiu, he wrote: "And there are beautiful women and there are hens that don't have feathers but hair as female cats and all black, and they lay eggs as ours, and they are very good to be eaten." (The Realm of Fugiu is the Chinese province Fukien or Fujian and belonged to the kingdom of Mangi. Red.)

Another description comes from Odorico, who visited China from 1318–28. In *Memoriale Toscano*, he described white Silkies: "Going away from this land [from today's Quanzhou] I was eastward to a town named Fuzhou, which has a perimeter of thirty miles. There are the biggest cocks of the world, and the hens white as snow, but they don't have feathers, but wool like sheep".



However, the reader will notice that neither Marco Polo or Odorico mention the colour of skin and legs, but only about the colour and hairy texture of the feathers.

Searching for more details in Chinese literature is almost impossible for obvious linguistic reasons but every now and then a miracle happens: the doors of China on the history of Silkie were suddenly wide open thanks to the dedication of Professor Ning Yang, assisted by his pupil Katie Zheng.



Above and left: The chicken coops and the white Silkies allowed out for their daily free range in the garden.

In answer to his queries on 18 December 2006, Prof. Ning Yang wrote to Italian Dr. Elio Corti: "Silky fowl, also named 'white phoenix' in China, is famous at home and abroad and is thought as nutritional and healthy product. In the prescription of Chinese medicine, the silky fowl is specially bred and supplied, and has claimed to have remarkable effects on nourishing the liver and kidney, invigorating the vital energy and blood, nourishing the refined materials in the viscera and clearing away pathogenic heat. Thus, there are many unambiguous records related with silky fowl from ancient China. However, digging into ancient books is time consuming and exhausting but with the help of my Ph.D. student, Katie Zheng, we have found the following records for you in ancient literatures of China".

**Right:
Ron holding a beautiful
white Silkie hen.**



To summarize Prof. Ning Yang's information from a genetic point of view:



1 - The first mention of the Chinese Silky dates from the period between 265 and 420 AD, Jin Dynasty. The chicken had a beard, its (white) feathers seemed wool, it had five toes, but the legs were yellow. So it was indeed homozygous for the gene *h* (hookless, absence of barbules to hooks) but did not yet possess the gene FM fibromelanosis.

2 - The black bones, due to fibromelanosis, appear due to the poet Du Fu (618-907 AD, Tang Dynasty), stating that "The black-bone chicken is a good medicine for treatment of my rheumatism". Whether this chicken had silky feathers is not quoted by him. (Source: Dr. Elio Corti and www.summagallicana.it)

Today, many Chinese Silkies are medicine-type breed, *i.e.* *Yugan Silkies* and *Jiangshan Silkies*. They have – different from our fancy Silkies - a single comb, no foot feathering and mainly four toes. Their silky plumage is black, same as the colour of beak, comb, skin, muscle, bone and legs. There are black-boned white Silkies too, *i.e.* *Yunyang White Silkies*, also with naked legs and four toes, and also White ones with white skin, red face, white earlobes and salmon shanks, *i.e.* *Jinyang Silkies*. These are only a few examples.

There are also fancy Silkies which resemble our exhibition Silkies; including the crest, comb, feathered shanks and five toes. Their average weight is 1.81kg for males and 1.66kg for females. (Source: *The "China Information System of Domestic Animal Genetic Resources" / Poultry Breeds of China.*)



For many years – particularly in the United States and parts of Europe – the breed was called the Japanese Silkie rather than the Chinese Silkie. The reasons for this are unclear as the Silkie comes from China and probably entered Japan via Chinese merchant ships. There are several sub-species of the Silkie, including

Siamese and African, which differ in appearance from the birds that we know as our 'fancy breed'.

Silkie

The most eye-catching feature of Silkies is their fluffy downy plumage but they have another unusual feature: very dark, almost black skin. Their shanks and toes are also black and even the bones and flesh is of a very dark colour. The head is small with a mulberry face, large dark eyes and turquoise ear lobes. The purple-coloured walnut comb is preferably broader than long with no horns protruding from the rear.

The Silkie is recognised in a non-bearded (with visible wattles) variety and bearded, which have a clearly defined ear muff and beard. All varieties must be crested. The crest of the hen should be globular and even in shape, while that of

the cock, has longer tassel-like feathers that fall backwards. The eyes should never be hidden by the crest. In the Netherlands, Silkies are not specifically preferred with a vaulted skull, as some fanciers believe a vault automatically ensures a larger crest. Good, upright crests will be passed along to their offspring.

Silkies have broad bodies; short in back with the silky saddle rising to the tail. The breast is broad and full and the shoulders of the male fairly covered with neck hackle. The wings are soft and fluffy at the shoulders with the ends of the flights ragged. (See left photo)

The tail is short and the ends of the main feathers are ragged. It should not be flowing, but forming a short round curve.



The legs are also short with the thighs covered with abundant fluff. The legs and the middle and outer toes are feathered, although the feathering of the middle toe is often moderate in quantity. At Ron's birds this is very good though. (see above photo)

The feet have five toes, with the fifth diverging from the rear toe and pointing upwards. (See left photo)

Silkies come in a wide range of colours and in Holland they are recognised in White, Black, Blue, Gold, Partridge, Cuckoo, Buff and Lavender.

The weights (according the Dutch Standard) of large Silkies are: Males 1.5 to 2.0 kilograms and females 1.4 to 1.8 kilograms (*Bantam Silkies: Male 600-700g Female 500-600g*).

Silkies are friendly, docile chickens and legendary as broodies. So much so, they are often used to hatch other bird's eggs.



Above: Ron also keeps some Ghent Cropper pigeons, again 'black and white', his favourite colours and perfectly harmonizing with the Silkies (and the coops).

Ron on his chickens

The Silkie is Ron's favourite breed, especially the bearded varieties. In the past he has kept other breeds including Sultans, Chabos and Polish – he prefers the more exotic breeds. But old habits die hard, so when he was able to keep chickens again after a two-year break, it just had to be Silkies. He started searching where his old birds had gone, but was able to purchase only a few lesser quality specimens. But he had faith in his ability to recapture the quality that he had once had and be able to show again. He began a very selective breeding program, using only pairs or trios at most. The experience gained over many years of Silkie breeding bore fruit; he can tell almost straight after hatching whether the chicks will measure up to his expectations – features like full beard or toes can be judged very early. If the chicks are inferior, the breeding pairs are changed and another batch of eggs hatched. Ron still rears those chicks that don't have the required characteristics and sells them as pets, or for broodies.

Right: Black cock, the eye colour should be dark.



He prefers Silkies with full crests and believes vaulted skulls produce fuller crests. He says the main thing is that the crest is upright and firm, so there is no impairment to the bird's vision.

He uses drinkers that the birds can't wet their crests in and they are fed breeder pellets instead of mash, which helps keep the beards clean. The feed is available all day.

Right: A white hen with a beautiful head with ideal crest form and full beard. As you can see, there is no impairment to the bird's vision.



Crests and beards are ideal places for lice so each year when summer starts, he sprays the crest, beards and below the wings with an insecticide as a preventive measure which seems to be effective in keeping his birds free from lice. In winter when it is freezing, the birds' combs are rubbed with a little Vaseline so the grease will be protected from frostbite. The downy plumage keeps the chickens warm in winter, but they don't like the heat of summer. A proper airflow in the coops helps, and on very hot days all his birds move to the front yard, where they enjoy the shade of the trees. As Silkies cannot fly very well, a low enclosure is enough to keep them inside the property. The litter in the coops is fine flax shavings, causing the droppings to dry and break apart quickly. Once a week, dirty or wet areas are cleaned out and replaced with fresh litter.

Ron said when a Silkie hen decides to brood, it is difficult to change her mind. The usual tricks of removing the eggs as early as possible after lay; picking her



up and pushing them out the coop or even blocking the nest so she can't sit on it, only helps for a while. When not broody, Silkies lay fairly well, according to Ron, and also during winter. He starts breeding early in February, because as the temperature rises, more hens go broody and stop laying. Ron prefers to hatch the chicks using an incubator.

Left: Pullets and hens with an old cock (almost in the back, with larger comb.)



Breeding and caring

In Holland, as in the rest of the Continent, Great Britain and Australia, both large and bantam Silkies are available (though in Australia bantams are rare and are more likely to be poorly sized large birds). In the United States and Canada, Silkies are classified as bantams, although the size is somewhere between the two sizes of large and bantam. Ron firmly believes the large varieties must be large. He is always striving for larger size, particularly with his Blacks. Unfortunately, there are very few pure-bred Blacks in Holland and due to their genetic background (crossings with other colours) often the black cocks will show some gold in the hackle (and he once bred a blue chicken from his black breeding pen).

To enlarge the size of the Blacks he is planning to mate a cuckoo bird, which are of good size in Holland.



Ron is happy to inbreed his birds so matings of mother to son and father to daughter are normal practice. It is important to keep good records, he says, and only keep the best birds for the next year's breeding pen. Ron claims that some common toe faults (like six or more toes or multiple toenails) are not necessarily due to inbreeding.

Another important issue is the silky feathering. Silkies carry a recessive 'h' gene which is not present in other breeds of fowls. (Normal feather structure is caused by the 'H' gene.) This results in the barbules being elongated and lacking the conformation required for hooking together. There has to be some structure in the wings and tails though. Once every four years he uses a bird from his own blood line – which is lacking silkiness – to improve the average feather structure in his birds.

Showing

With all these unique features it is easy to find faults when judging Silkies. This often discourages breeders and many stop breeding and showing Silkies. Ron believes judges should write more extensive judging reports – detailing not just faults, but also positive features. Silkies must also be washed before a show – not just the white ones, but all colours – as this has a very positive effect on the fluffy appearance. While Ron washes his birds and has become very skilled at this over the years, the washing and blow-drying takes time and not everybody is willing to make the effort.

The Standard description of the Silkie is fine by Ron, but he thinks it a pity that the little horns protruding from the back of the comb are no longer allowed. He is convinced that birds with these horns have better fertility and today many Silkie breeders complain about high numbers of infertile eggs. One of the common faults found in Silkies is the lack of feathering on the middle toe, but Ron's birds do not have that problem.

Over the years he has exhibited at many large national and international shows. His proudest moment was winning European Champion in Gent (Belgium) 1992 and being rated the best Silkie breeder in Europe. For Ron, the most memorable and pleasant shows are the annual Avicultura shows in The Hague. He also has a special affinity for the 'Delta Show' – being the provincial show of Zeeland – and this year's results brought him back into the ranking of top Silkie breeders.



To end with

Ron said his greatest regret is that interest in the fancy is diminishing, with insufficient young fanciers, too many intolerant people (neighbours) and the

negative influence of bird flu making people afraid to keep chickens. The current financial crisis has driven up both the cost of chicken feed and participating in shows.

But Ron is contented – with seven crowing cockerels and tolerant neighbours – he plans to keep on going for some time to come.



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