

ICELANDIC CHICKENS



Above: Wintertime in Iceland. Photo and owner: Jóhanna Hardardottir.

VIKING HENS, A FEAST FOR THE EYES AND THE SOUL

Photos: Henk Kooiman and Karin Pas from Holland.

Breed information and more photos kindly provided by Jóhanna Hardardottir from Iceland.

Intro

In the summer of 2009, Henk Kooiman and Karin Pas visited several Icelandic chicken breeders and came back home in Holland with a beautiful series of photos of the 'Viking hens'. We searched for information on the breed, but all we could find was published in the Icelandic language. Henk advised us to contact one of the breeders that they had visited, Jóhanna Hardardottir, who speaks English and would be the

perfect person to contact, as she is not only one of the specialists in this breed, but also the founder of the 'Rescue Club'. So, with Jóhanna's help, information and photos we are now able to proudly present you the story on this exotic and unknown chicken breed.



Left: Henk and Jóhanna.
Photo: Karen Vos.

A bit of history

Iceland chickens, better known as Viking hens, or "*Landnamshaena*" as called there, has lived in Iceland since the settlers crossed the Atlantic ocean in the 10th century. (The term Viking is customarily used to refer to the Norse explorers, warriors, merchants, and pirates who raided, traded, explored and settled in wide areas of Europe and the North Atlantic islands from the late eighth to the mid-11th century. *Source: Wikipedia.*)

Right: Replica of a Viking Longship, at the Chicago World Fair in 1893.

These Vikings took their livestock onboard the 'longships' and must have picked out the healthiest and best individuals for the travel.

The name *Íslenska landnámshænan* – literally means "Icelandic chicken of the settlers" and another of their Icelandic names - *Haughænsni* - means "pile chickens," due to their habit of foraging on manure piles and other places rich with insects and seeds.

The Viking hen turned out to be a 'tough chicken' and settled fine in the new country. It became a resource of fresh eggs and meat to the people for over a thousand years. It soon spread throughout the country and was the only chicken breed on the island for ten centuries. The long isolation made the breed genetically strong and can be thanked for the fact that there has been surprisingly little mixing of breeds since the import of brown and white Leghorns was permitted in the 1930's.



Left: Icelandic chickens and Sheepdog.

Photo: Karen Pas.

Apart from the chickens there are more Icelandic breeds, for instance the Iceland horse and the Icelandic sheepdog.

The thing that makes Icelandic animals special, is the fact that the Icelandic people don't allow imports. This keeps their genetics pure and keeps out

disease. This also means that, for instance, Icelandic horses if they are exhibited outside of Iceland, they can never return to Iceland.

Survival throughout the ages

The Leghorn soon took the Viking hen's place as commercial layer and meat bird, restricting the population of the Viking hen to being barnyard chickens on small farms scattered over the country. Luckily, thanks to its character the small farmers didn't want to exchange the hardy Viking hen for a Leghorn and a few more eggs each year.

However, as time passed by it became harder and harder for the farmers to get fertile eggs and chicks close to their homes when foxes or mink slaughtered their free range flock. Also the competition with the Leghorn as a commercial breed slowly but surely had bad consequence for the breed. Finally the Viking hen faced endangerment late in the 20th century. Special efforts were made by the Agricultural Research Institute in 1974 to conserve the remaining native population.



The photos in this page are taken at Július Már before a terrible fire destroyed his farm. Photos: Karen Pas.

Viking hens

As most ancient breeds the Viking hens are colourful and vibrant. They are medium sized, strongly built birds that adapt well to different environments. The chickens come in all colours and shades; white, red, orange, gray, pink, yellow, brown and black, but they are never monochromatic.

Mottled, barred, pencilled and a wide variety of markings, dark or light collars and fringes, - anything goes. Breeding Viking hens is like playing the lottery; you never know what you are going to get. They won't necessarily look like the parent birds. Actually they are more likely to look like a distant relative or 'forefather' than the parents.



The combs can either be single or rose, even double on roosters and it's quite common that the hens have a crest on their head. The roosters have large, bright red wattles and when they have reached two years of age they have grown large spurs. The roosters are substantially larger than the hens and proudly show off their majestic tail with long shiny sickles.

Above and right: All sorts of combs or even a crest.

**Below: All kind of colours and markings.
Photos: Karen Pas.**



Utility and qualities

The Viking hens are good layers. The egg shells come in a variety of white and cream to light brown, and the owners often know from which hen each egg comes. The eggs are close to medium size, sometimes a bit on the smaller side and the hens lay an egg every day for the first two years. Older birds slow down although they keep laying 3-4 eggs a week for many years more.

A Viking hen has been known to live to the age of 15, but had stopped laying a few years earlier. The hens are good mothers and sometimes it takes effort to



keep them off the eggs if they are not supposed to hatch. Each hen can manage to take care of 9-10 eggs and chicks. No flying predator would try to get close to the newly hatched chicks as the hens get really mean and nasty to unknown visitors, although humans can take a look without being pecked at.

Left and below: Chicks.

The biggest quality of the Viking hen is the character. When the survey asked the owners why they had chosen the Viking hen, the answer was almost always the same: "They're fun!"

Below: Jóhanna holding two very typical Viking hens, giving a good view on the size of the birds.

Photos: Jóhanna Hardardottir.



On the whole the breed is curious, friendly and calm, but each bird has its own personality. In the same flock there can for example be a loner, one especially stubborn hen, a glamour girl, old granny, the professor, a tyrant, a rumourmonger and many other funny personalities. Icelanders have a tradition of naming their animals and even in the biggest flocks most hens have a name that is connected to

looks or character (Sweetie, Loner, Mrs. Brown, Ashes, Gossip..).

The Viking hen is very self-sufficient and hardy and an ideal free range chicken. They really do love their freedom. Confinement just doesn't suit them. They are outside at daytime all year if it isn't snowing or raining too heavily. They are always on the lookout for a treat; a big fat fly on a wall, fresh weeds in the backyard, or some breadcrumbs or leftovers from the family. Viking hens love people and when somebody steps outside the house the whole flock usually

comes running (or flying!) towards him to see if he has something for them. Some of the birds want to be held and petted and others will eat out of your hand if you let them. This quality has led to many people keeping 2-3 hens as pets in towns, but it's not a good idea to keep a rooster with them if you want to stay friends with your neighbours!

The ERL Club



The Viking hen has many dedicated admirers and fans and one of them, Jóhanna Hardardottir - a journalist and a chicken fancier, started preparing a rescue aid with the help of The Farmers Assotiation.

The owners and breeders club *Eigenda- og ræktendafélags landnámsþænsna* – in short ERL - was founded in November 2003 and was lucky enough to have a crew of energetic enthusiasts on the board and the work has already shown to have been successful. The population of Viking hens has multiplied tripled since then and is still going up. Today over 0.1% of the nation is a member of the club, and that tells a long story of the Viking hens popularity. The club has been very active from the beginning and started by gathering information on all owners and breeders in the country. Shortly after that a survey was done amongst them to record the number of chickens, colours and other things to help breeders plan their moves.

Some people say, the Viking hen is not a 'breed' but a landrace fowl. According to Jóhanna, this is somewhat true - somewhat not. At least they are kept separate from other breeds. It is even assumed the Icelandic chickens are genetically different from all other chickens and carry a specific DNA. In the beginning of the year 2011 the ERL expects to have the results of a new DNA research and both owners, breeders and scientist are very excited.



Right: Chickens at Jóhanna's.

Photo: Jóhanna Hardardottir.

Shows

One of the next projects of the Club was to buy show cages from Britain and add a poultry show to Reykjavik's colourful Summer Festivities. To everybody's surprise the show was a tremendous success and since then it has become an annual event in Reykjavik. Recently they even have 2 great shows a year; one in Reykjavik and one in Akureyri. The show cages are also lent out for smaller poultry shows around the country and everywhere they are on show, people swarm in to see the Viking hens.

Right: Just before the last show opened.

Photo: Jóhanna Hardardottir.

At their poultry shows, the chickens are not 'judged' in conformity with a Breed Standard, as is customary in most countries.



Jóhanna said: "Fortunately we have no Standards here yet and I hope there will never be; that has often proved to be a root of evil for old breeds!" The shows are for promoting the breed and giving the nation a chance to get to know the chickens. Every guest gets one vote to chose the most attractive male and female. When the show is over, the votes get counted and they have a winner for both sexes. It is great fun for everyone and the guests stay interested and wait in excitement to see if 'their bird' has won. They have found that this makes people ask what to look for in the birds and even start to ask WHY - is this one better than the others, what is good - what not? We think this really is a good idea to make people interested in a breed; it generates interest to both young and old.

Left: Could she be the winner today?

Photo: Jóhanna Hardardottir.

Promoting the breed

The best thing that has been done for the breed is to publish an annual magazine with stories, photos, education and advice for all those who are interested in the Viking hen. The magazine is free and amongst stories from the owners you can find information on where to buy the chickens, how to house and feed them and everything else needed to know for beginners and experienced owners. The magazine has inspired the owners to contact each other; they swap roosters for new blood, buy chicks to add new colours to their flock and give each other tips. The magazine has spread to Icelanders living abroad and that has led to Viking hens being exported to foreign countries, i.e. United States of America, Germany, France, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. In summer 2009 the ERL launched a website: www.haena.is which has very good information about the breed in Icelandic and has increased the interest in Iceland even more, and sometimes there is even a waiting list for chicks in Iceland.



Above and left: Chickens at Júlíus Már.

Photos: Karen Pas.

Importing hatching eggs often requires special permits, especially in the US. Nevertheless, in the past ten years, several enthusiastic breeders in the US succeeded in legally importation with the required permits, blood testing, inspections, etc. But after recent changes in regulations and airline security it may be more difficult, if not impossible to do.

In the year 2005 the ERL launched a marketing plan called "Eggs from free range Viking hens". Demand for the product has been more than the ERL can fulfill. The eggs are first class free range eggs with an orange yolk and a nice creamy taste. Most of the eggs are sold straight from the producer to hotels, health stores and regular customers in towns, but the supply has never been enough to meet the demand from supermarkets or convenience stores. Many of the owners are planning to add to their stock in order to fill the market and there is certainly room for at least twice the amount of eggs they have on the market now.

In conclusion

Keeping barnyard chickens has become a trend in Iceland, but the media coverage of the Avian Influenza several years ago has certainly scared many people off. As for now nobody knows what the future will bring for the Viking hen that has always been free to roam around the farm at daytime and seek shelter in the pen over night. With a new outbreak of Avian Influenza it might be sentenced to solitary confinement or even worse; death of large flocks.

But whatever happens, we are sure that the ERL's effort to reintroduce the Viking hen to the nation has made an everlasting change. By now, everybody in Iceland knows the Viking hen and it is becoming trendy as the oldest know chicken breed in the world and its treasured ancient gene pool that certainly is worth breeding.

Photo: Jóhanna Hardardottir.

