

# BULGARIAN POULTRY BREEDS



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*"Our economy is based on the weak wing of the chicken and the fragile egg shell "- Quote of Dimitar Atanasov, Minister of Agriculture of Bulgaria in the middle of 30 years of XX century*



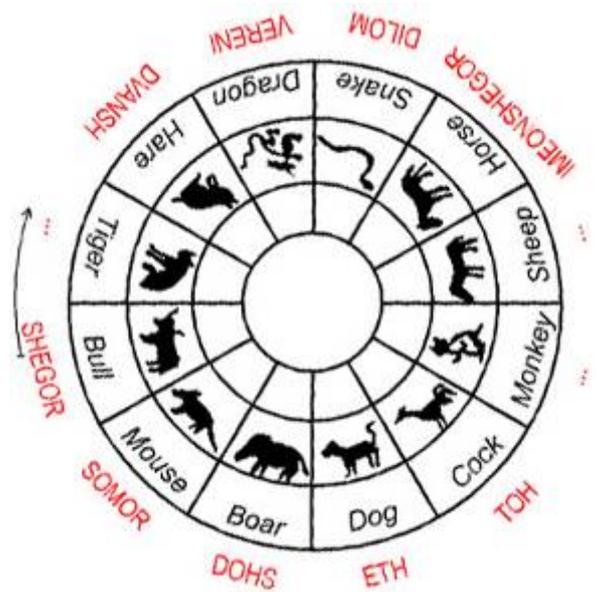
## **Historical review of poultry breeding in Bulgaria**

Bulgaria is an ancient European country with a great history, created in the VII century. Its actual location is in the South-East of the Balkan's peninsula, including 111 000 km<sup>2</sup> of picturesque nature and a population of around 7.5 million. The country is EU and NATO member.

Proto-Bulgarians are an ancient civilization, composed from different tribes coming from Central Asia. They had big herds of cattle, horse, sheep and chickens (probably cock-fighting breeds for distraction and religious rituals). The most honored animal was the horse.

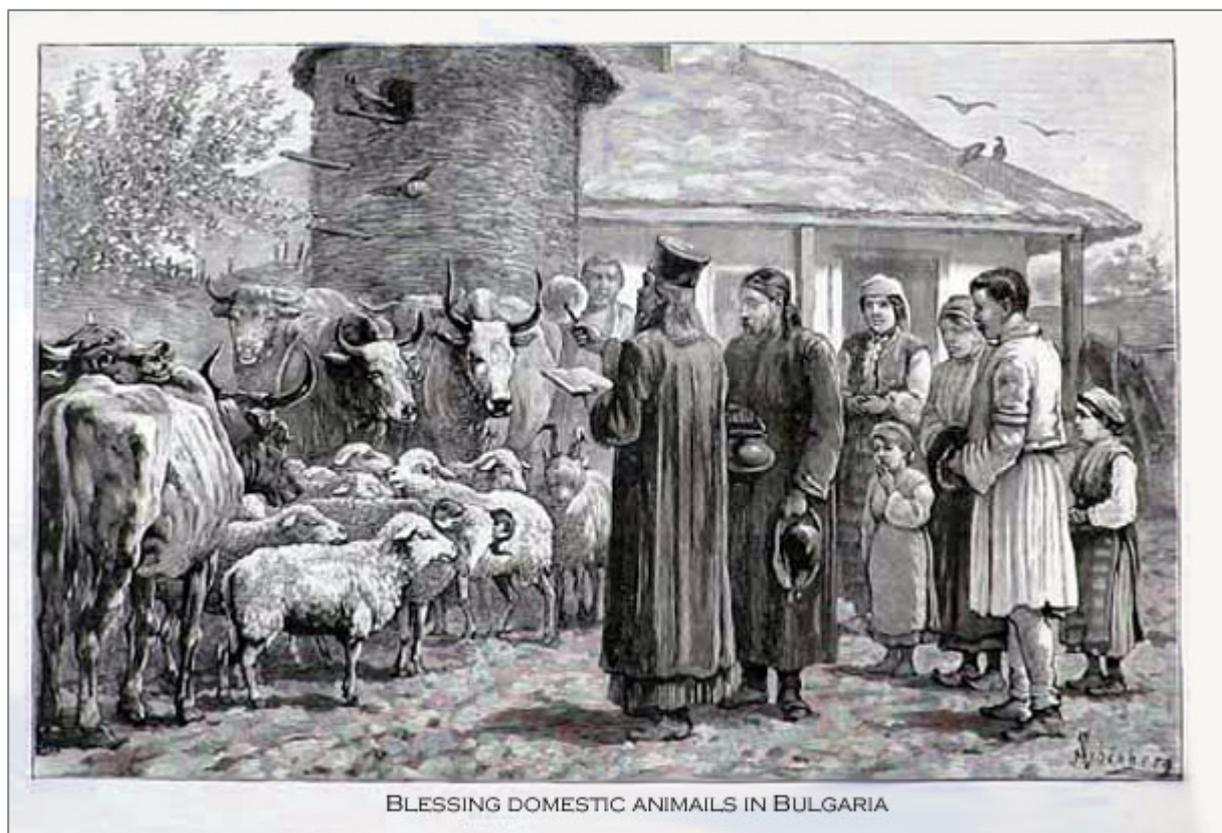
The proto-Bulgarian calendar was divided in 12 cyclic years which were drawn like 12 animals and one of them was called "cock". Animals were sacred for the proto-Bulgarians, as they played the role of totems.

**Right: The twelve-year animal cyclic calendar of the Proto-Bulgarians**



During the Great migration they moved from Asia to Europe. In the first half of VII century they populated the region between the Caucasus, Volga River and the Carpathian Mountains. This newly formed country was known by ancient Byzantine authors as Ancient Great Bulgaria.

In the VII century the Khazars destroyed the country and some of proto-Bulgarian tribes followed Khan Asparuh (third son of Khan Kubrat) to the Balkan's peninsula where the First Bulgarian kingdom was created, also known as Danubian Bulgaria. They merged with local Slavs tribes and till 681 struggled with Byzantium for the territory. Slavs were cultivators and livestock-breeders. Influenced by Byzantium tradition, chickens were productivity birds for meat and eggs. It was the main poultry bird in the First Bulgarian kingdom. After the Christianization (865) heathen rituals were forgotten.



**Above: A print from "The Illustrated London News", 12th February 1887.**

The good climate conditions and geographic location and well developed grain production helped the evolution of animal and especially poultry breeding. During the Byzantine occupation (1018-1185) and the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1396) poultry breeding was small and birds were used to trade and for food.

The next major stage in Bulgarian history is the 500 years of Ottoman slavery under which the country was between 1396 and 1878. The Ottoman Empire includes waste territories on 3 continents: North Africa, South-East Asia and South-East Europe. Main activities of Bulgarians were agriculture and craftsmanship. Each family was cultivating 3-5 ha of land. They had the right to heritage it or sell it but all had to be cultivated and worked which was controlled by local and central authorities.

The population had to pay different taxes and duties to the Ottoman empire. They were forced to work fixed number of days for the Empire; to participate in the construction of roads, buildings and other infrastructure projects.

Most of the harvest was given to the Empire to cover taxes and duties. Although labour tools were primitive, good climate conditions, geographic location and hard work of peasants ensured the production of significant quantities.

Sheep breeding was very well developed due to the interest in this animal from Muslims. In this period of starvation and poverty, chickens were mainly for personal use (meat and eggs) and a small part for trade. Flocks were leaved free in the nature and were composed by 20-60 birds. Their menu was composed of seeds, insects, mollusks, rodents and plants. During the winter season the menu was composed mainly of food remaining from their owner's family and poor grain fodder. Birds are small, primitive, with low laying capacity and small eggs, very vital, with accelerated maturity with excellent reproductive capacity.

Geese breeding was spread near big water basins and rivers and mainly near the rivers Danube, Yantra and Maritza.

The high society in feudatory Bulgaria was breeding for decoration of its seraglios; mainly chickens, pigeons, peacocks, pheasants and canaries. An ancient Turkish chicken breed, the Sultan, was very popular for garden decoration of the Sultan (the name comes from it), of the Vizir and local governors.

**Right: Donek pigeons.**  
**Photo: Mick Bassett.**



**Left: Palamarski pigeon. Photo: BAPB.**



Other popular breeds for decoration were the longcrows. Afterwards they were spread across Europe. They are the ancestors of the Denizli (Turkey), Serbian longcrower/Kosova longcrower (Serbia and Kosovo), Berat fowl (Albania and former Yugoslavia), and probably the Bergische Kraeher (Germany).

Cock-fighting was very popular and considered as entertainment of the high society in the Empire. Actually there is a breed called Hint Horozu or Turkish Asil which are similar to ancient game fowls.

After the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, the Turks leave the country, taking with them the tradition of breeding ornamental fowl. Pigeons remained as the only decorative birds. All others are used for food. Breeding was poor and primitive. The flocks were composed of around 15-20 chickens. In plain regions there were turkey rafters, which were left free around the villages to search for food (mainly insects, harvest leftovers, seeds and vegetation). Geese were spread around rivers and closed water basins.

Although breeding was poor, primitive and dispersed, it was very important for Bulgaria. According to 1889 statistics, 20 million eggs were exported. Meanwhile Bulgaria became fifth exporter after Denmark, Holland, Poland and Ireland. Between First and Second World War, eggs export has reached 400 million pieces. This is the second most important export stock after tobacco.

The Ministry of Agriculture of Bulgaria started to improve breeds by importing birds from Europe, than from USA, Canada and Russia. First are imported Partridge Leghorn, black Minorca, French type Faverolles, La Fleche and then Rhode Island red, barred and white Plymouth Rock, white Leghorn and many others. But due to extensive breeding the results were unsatisfactory.

During the 40-es of XX century a major research was conducted on breeds structure in Bulgaria. Some major groups are categorized and named after their habitat regions : **combined breeds** - buff Elenska, Starozagorska red (Stara Zagora red), white Sevlievska chickens and a **light/laying breed**: Black Shumen chicken (Black Shumenska).

Due to the high interest in eggs laying it was decided to develop the Black Shumenska (Black Shumen) chicken which is a light/laying breed, well adapted to temperate climate. For the selection of a dual-purpose breed, for meat and eggs, it was decided to work with Stara Zagora red chicken.



However, after the penetration of highly productive breeds and later of their crosses and contemporary laying and meat hybrids, the importance of local birds decreased. Due to the lack of planned breeding, buff Elenska and white Sevlievska chickens were absorbed and disappeared in the sixties of XX century.

**Left: Stara Zagora red chicken.**

Poultry breeding in Bulgaria till 1949 was small and extensive. Rural families had around 15 to 30 hens. The total was approximately 12 mln birds of which 10 mln were layers. Chicken

production represented an important part of thremmatology in the country. More than 100 cooperations and enterprises were created for buy up from small producers and their resell. More than 300 hatcheries were created with a total capacity of 800 thousand eggs. During 1939 in Bulgaria 744 mln eggs and 20.700 tones of bird meat were produced, most of which was for export.

During the second half of XX century big poultry farms were constructed. Hybrid layer and broiler birds are developed and used in industrial (extensive) and backyard (intensive) farming. In 1950 the Livestock breeding Institute in

Kostinbrod was created, and a branch in Stara Zagora – Hybrid center for poultry breeding. During 1967 Bulgaria was the third exporter of bird products after Holland and Poland and the income is the second most important after tobacco. During this period are used the latest achievements in breeding and are created some of the main highly productive Bulgarian livestock breeds as Starozagorska red chicken and has started the work on Black Shumen/Shumenska chicken and White Benkovski goose. (Photo right)



After the dissolution of Soviet Economy Environment, all economy sectors were experiencing problems. Research successes were forgotten, buildings were demolished and genetic resources were lost. This destiny overtook Bulgarian breeds, which were kept in collection flocks, research facilities, test station, agriculture institutes and schools, where they were improved. Flocks composed of local birds have disappeared and so does the glorious Bulgarian livestock-breeding.

Today more than 83% of birds and 90% of eggs and meat are produced in small, extensive private farms. Most of birds are for meat and eggs, but unfortunately this are mainly different crosses of local birds and hybrid productive hens (mainly auto sexing laying hybrids). In the fancy breeding there is a big diversity of colours and types; there are chickens with crest, different comb types, booted-legs, bearded, frizzle, Naked necks and many other crosses. In other words, there is a great variety of birds which are used to satisfy the needs of meat and eggs and their breeding is randomly organized without clear vision and clean result. There are few fanciers which are breeding pure poultry breeds and in 2010 they created the Bulgarian Association of Poultry Breeders (BAPB), see <http://bapb.dir.bg/> and <http://www.pss.dir.bg> Their main goal is to make this hobby popular, and to improve Bulgarian breeds. During 2010, BAPB members have imported many breeds from Western Europe, which are not (yet) popular in the country, such as: Serama, Appenzeller Spitzhauben, Barnevelder, Vorwerk, Brakel, Antwerp bearded bantam, Lakenfelder, Bielefelder, Araucana, German type Faverolles and many others.

**Below: Black Shumen hen.**



**Above: Banner BAPB**

## THE BREEDS

### 1. BLACK SHUMEN/SHUMENSKA CHICKEN



#### Standard characteristics:

**Cock weight: 2,0-2,5 kg**

**Hen weight: 1,5-1,8 kg**

**Laying capacity: 160-170 eggs**

**average egg weight: 53-55 grams**

**Egg colour: white with light nuance of gray**

**Plumage colour: black with green gloss**

**Ring size: 18/16**

An ancient, primitive breed, existing probably since the end of XIX - beginning of



XX century and popular in the North-East part of the country near Kamtchia River. The birds have some of the characteristics of the Mediterranean chicken type – big comb and wattles, drooping comb for the hen, elegant body, lays white eggs, non-setter, early maturing, with good laying capacity but they have also some signs from ancient breeds: hardy on bad nutrition and habitat conditions, fearful, volatile, economical eater with excellent reproduction capacity, aggressive, vital and active with low body weight. One of the main specificities are the red year lobs and the white coloured eggs (compared to modern Mediterranean breeds, the nuance is gray). Average age of first egg is around 145 days, which places it as one of the quickest mature breeds in the world. The Black Shumen/Shumenska chicken is suitable for free range and bio-production.

## History

The Black Shumen/Shumenska chicken was randomly created by local breeders in North-East Bulgaria near the end of XIX and the beginning of 20<sup>e</sup> century. Her name comes from the region of origin – Shumen. According to local believes, a black hen is the symbol of female beginning and there are many rituals in which the bird must take part. Due to bad conditions of feeding and breeding, lack of breeding-knowledge of local people, many predators and deceases, a vital and hardy breed was created with good reproduction capacity but with low body and egg weight.

Scientific breed improvement and selection starts in the middle of 20<sup>e</sup> century and is characterized by two main periods between 1951 and 1989. In the first period there was a cross-breeding of local black hens from the Shumen region with black Minorca cocks for improvement of laying capacity and eggs size (probably random cross with black Minorca or partridge Leghorn was conducted in the in the first half of past century because of the extraordinary white eggs it has). After consolidation of birds, the breed is recognized. During the 60's and 70's of the 20<sup>e</sup> century, the second round of improvement started, which aim was to obtain a bigger bird. To make it, blood from Rhode Island Red was transfused in the Black Shumen/Shumenska chicken population, but the process has been stopped on early stage.



Till the end of the XX century the Black Shumen/Shumenska chicken is widespread as collection flocks kept in research facilities, test station, agriculture institutes and schools and private farms.

The decline of Bulgarian thremmatology in the end of 20<sup>e</sup> century and the economic interest have destroyed all flocks except the one in the Hybrid center for poultry breeding in Stara Zagora which was composed of 150 Black Shumen chickens in 2010 and 100 in 2011.

In 2010 the Bulgarian association of poultry breeders (BAPB) was founded. Its main goal is to make popular, maintain and improve the Black Shumen/Shumenska chicken and Stara Zagora/ Starozagorska red chicken. Thanks to its members the interest for these breeds has returned and many poultry fanciers

have birds in their coops. In 2011 the breed will be exported from Bulgaria for the first time.

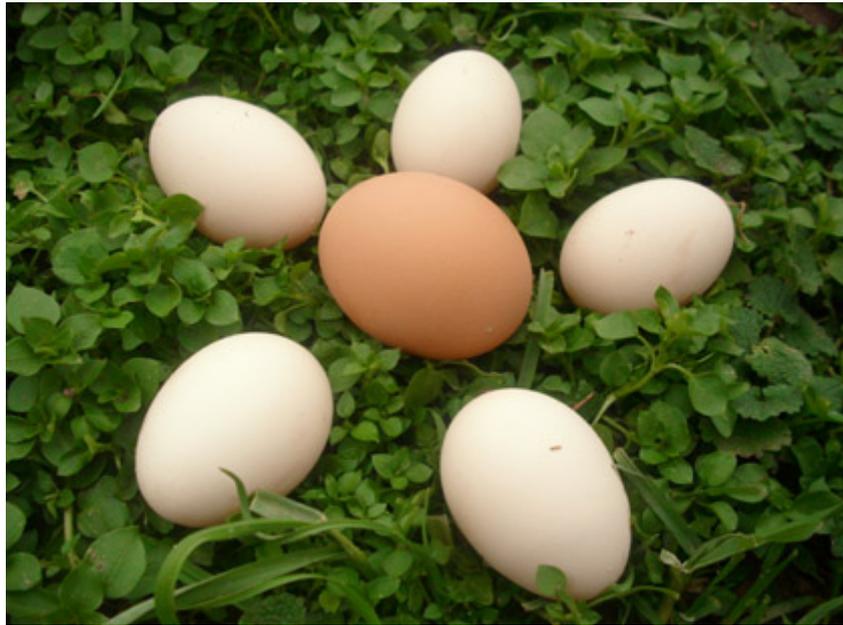
In 2011 members of BAPB have started a selective work for the creation of blue colour, according to the breeding plan for 2011/2015.

**Right: White eggs of the Black Shumen and a brown egg of the Starozagorska red chicken.**

## Exterior

Cock:

The body of the cock is elegant, strong, cylindrical. The neck is averagely long, the hackle is well feathered. Shoulders are wide, rounded, partially covered from hackle feathers. The back is moderately wide, medium long, a little declined to the tail. The saddle is well feathered, medium long with sharp passage to the tail. The breast is rounded and slightly protruding, carried high. The abdomen is wide and well developed. The wings are long, kept close to the body, in parallel with the back line without exceeding the body. The tail is long, opened, fairly up without going over 45°, well developed with wide crescent-shaped sickles. The head is of medium size. The face is red or dark-red, smooth and featherless.



Eyes are big, bright, with red-orange colour.

The comb is single, large, straight and upright with 5-7 comb spikes. The red ear-lobes are medium size and elongated. Wattles are big and elongated. The black beak is strong, slightly curved and averagely large. The gray-black shanks are of medium length, robust and featherless, with four toes. Plumage tight to the body.

Hen:

The orthogonal body is carried horizontally, long and moderately wide. The abdomen is broad and full. The tail is medium long and wide, carried on 45-50° angle (higher than the tail of the cock).



The comb is flopping over to one side in the rear without hiding the eye (there are hens with straight comb, which is an unwanted feature). Plumage is black with green gloss for both sexes. For the hen it is more opaque.

Major faults: small or very big birds; white ear lobes; squirrel tail which is carried too low or too high; poorly developed tail; droopy, small or malformed comb for the cock; rugged, big head; X- shaped legs; violet strain colour of plumage; white feathers; red feathers in hackle, saddle and shoulders plumage.

*More Bulgarian poultry breeds will be published in our next update.*

*With our thanks to our team member, Mrs. Wanda Floor-Zwart, who is going to be the first breeder in the Netherlands of the Black Shumen and Stara Zagora red chicken.*

