



# THE DELAWARE CHICKEN

*Text and photos: Elizabeth Holmes,  
secretary of the Delaware Poultry Club, USA.*

**Above photo:  
Young cockerel on a winter day.**

The Delaware chicken is an engaging and friendly dual purpose bird developed in the 1940's by George Ellis, owner of the Indian River Hatchery in Ocean View, Delaware. Mr. Ellis hoped to produce a superior broiler chicken by crossing Barred Rock roosters on New Hampshire hens. He got a sport, whom he named Superman, and the resulting Delaware breed was the broiler of choice in the 1940's, remaining popular until it was displaced by the Cornish X. It was originally called the Indian River, and some hatcheries in the United States still refer to the breed by this name.

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**Left: A young pullet who has fairly good tail color but should have darker hackle markings.**

The Delaware is a delightful choice for a backyard flock in that they are good foragers, cold hardy, yet can withstand heat, and are usually a very personable and calm bird, often being friendly enough to sit on your lap or ride on your shoulder. The hens are good layers of a large light brown egg, and some strains are known to start laying relatively early, sometimes under 20 weeks of age.

They are difficult to breed in that the rooster and hen have different tail markings- the rooster is to have black and white barring on the tail feathers while the hens are to have black tail feathers edged in white, with the coverts showing indications of irregular black and white barring. This distinction has caused many breeders to use a double mating system; some breeders have reported better luck using males that are too dark in coloring (having some solid black tail feathers) in order to produce hens with the correct tail feather color. The legs and beak are yellow in both sexes, and both sexes should have broken black barring in the hackle feathers.



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**Left: This rooster has very good conformation if not a perfect 5 point comb, but produced excellently marked hens. The pullet is an example of a too pinched tail.**

**Right: A pretty good hen.**

The outline of a Delaware should be full and round, with a bowl shaped underline, and a wide, open tail. One of the difficulties many breeders face is getting the nice, open fan tail.

Another problem is breeding out the Columbian markings that seem to crop up- especially in the roosters. There may have been too much out crossing done in trying to work on the unique



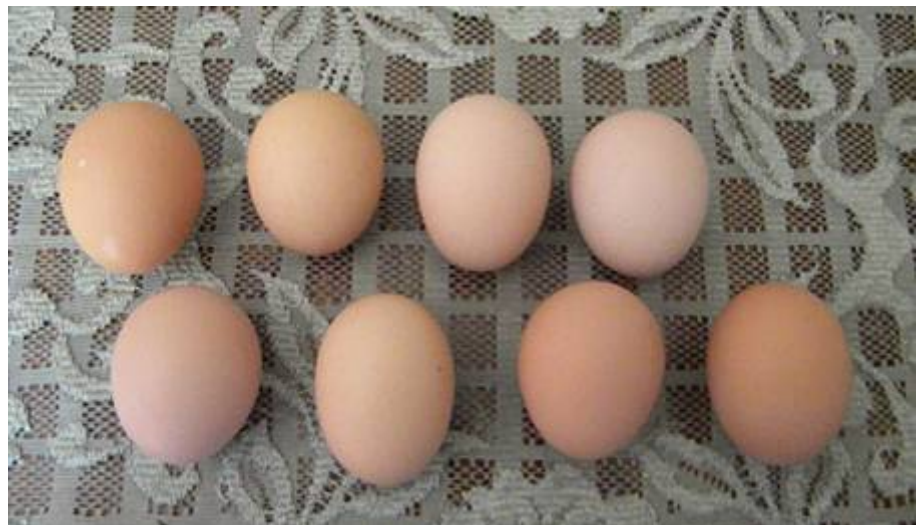
coloring of the Delaware, as many strains still hatch out birds with distinctly black tails and penciled hackles instead of the correct barring.



**Above: A group of hens showing too light hackle markings and the pinched tails, which are to be avoided.**

Another problem is having the barring and hackle color be blue instead of deep black- too frequently the birds are too light in color. As barring usually negates green sheen in black, the feathers should not show green, although this is a minor point with most breeders.

**Right: Delaware eggs.**



**Below: Delaware chick.**

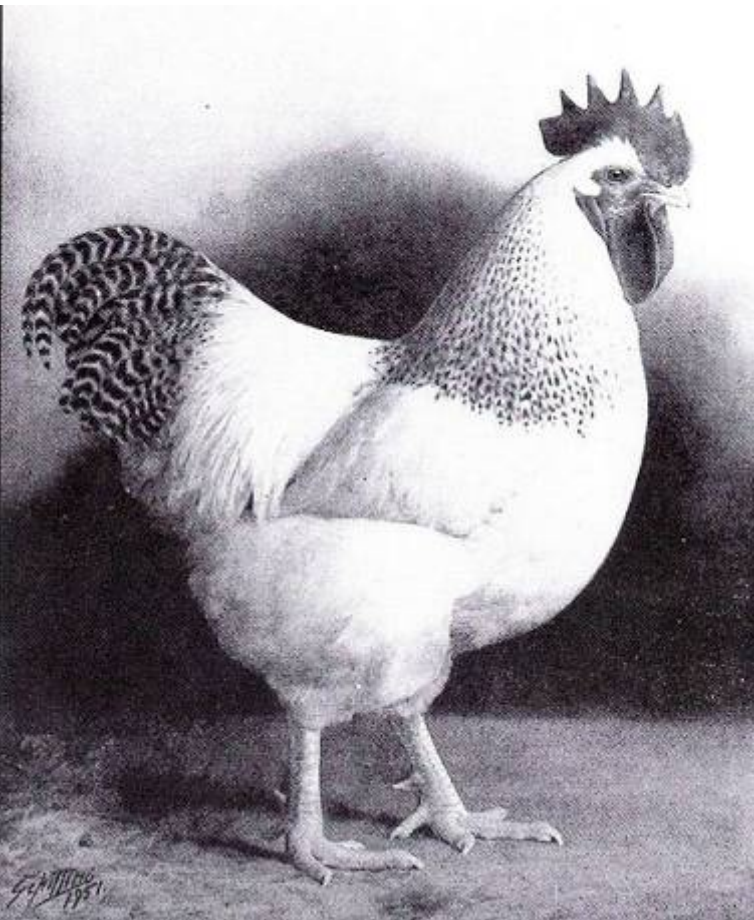




**Left: Same chick, 10 days older.**

Several breeders have experimented with starting from scratch, so to speak, and have taken superior Barred Rock Roosters and crossed them with superior New Hampshire hens. This first cross results in birds with a cuckoo pattern. Mating the F1's results in a wide selection of chicks, from black to buff, but includes Delaware patterned males and silver columbian females. Crossing the resultant Delaware patterned males with the silver columbian females should result in Delawares. Of course, there is

always the hope that the first cross will produce a sport as it did for George Ellis. Other breeders try to improve the conformation of their Delawares by crossing the best Delaware rooster available on superior New Hampshire hens.

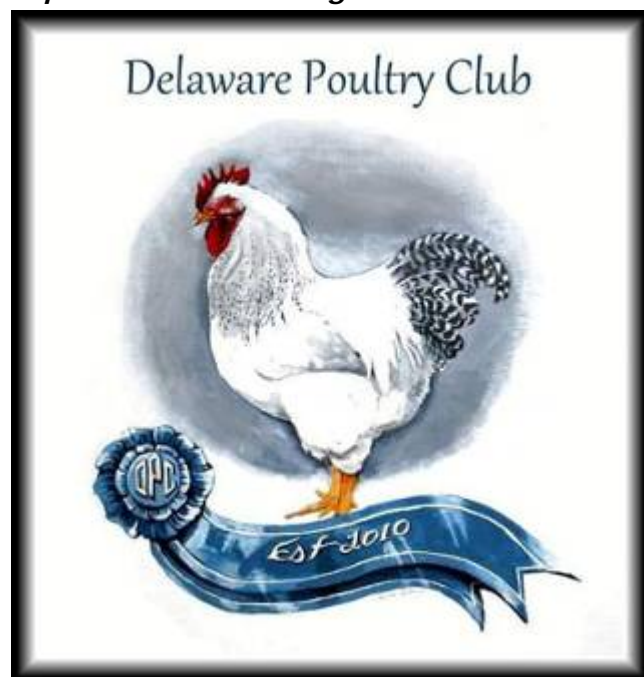


**Left: The original Standard drawing by Arthur Schilling, 1951, black and white half tone of the Delaware male.**

This drawing is courtesy of the American Poultry Association. Sam Brush, President of the APA, added the following information on the breed: *"The Delaware breed came on the scene fairly late, and for many years it languished in the backwaters of hatchery catalogs; an oddity with a very small genetic base. It has been interesting to watch the growing interest in the breed here during the last five years, and some of the breeders that took up the breed are now producing some very credible specimens that capture the productive capabilities of the original birds."*

**Right: Club logo of the Delaware Poultry Club, established in 2010.**

<http://thedelclub.webstarts.com>





Left: This hen won National Champion at the Ohio National Show 2010. Fine hackle markings and fairly good tail color.

Below: A close-up of the very good hackle marking of this hen.



Above: My hen Tilda, National Champion at the 2011 Crossroads Show, who obviously was not impressed by her win.

Right: Delaware hen photographed by Aviculture Europe at the European Show in Prague in 2004. The hen was entered by Francesco Confalonieri from Italy.

Comments by Elizabeth: *"It's hard to tell on the body conformation, as the angle is a bit tipped, but I can critique color, which is excellent - I really like her"*.



It is a challenging breed if you want show birds, but a very rewarding breed to work with, as you get the benefit of lots of big eggs, and a freezer full of Sunday dinners.

Please visit the Club's website <http://thedelclub.webstarts.com> for much more information and photos!

*Note: I did not include anything about bantam Delawares in the article, as I know very little beyond the fact they were mostly developed by Cecil Moore, and are about the cutest things I have ever seen.*

The following text is added by the editors of Aviculture Europe



Left: State Bird of Delaware.  
Right: Delaware Blue hen by Diane Jacky.

### **The other Delaware chicken ~ Official state bird of Delaware ~**

The Delaware Blue Hen is the official state bird of Delaware. Having a chicken as official state bird is not unique; the Rhode Island Red is the state bird of Rhode Island. However, the Delaware Blue Hen is not the recognized chicken breed as described in this



article. The fame of the Blue Hen of Delaware began in 1775, when the Continental Congress resolved that a battalion was to be raised from the three lower counties along the Delaware River. Thus, the Delaware Regiment was born, composed of eight companies, representing New Castle, Kent and Sussex counties. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Company was composed under the command of Captain John



Caldwell.

Above: 1e Delaware Regiment marching. Painting by Stanley M. Arthurs. The original is located in the Delaware archives. Photo courtesy of <http://1stdelawareregiment.org/history/>

It is said that Captain John Caldwell, an avid fan and owner of gamecocks, carried two birds with him onto the battle fields. These birds were the male offspring of a certain blue feathered hen, so Caldwell's men came to be known as Sons of the Blue Hen. When not fighting the enemy, the officers and men amused themselves by pitting their Blue Hen chickens in cockfights. The fame of these cockfights spread throughout the army and when in battle, the Delaware men fought so valiantly that they were compared to these fighting cocks. One



story states that men from Caldwell's company rushed into the battle screaming "We are sons of the Blue Hen and we game to the end!"

Also, preceding the Battle of Long Island August 27th 1776, some stories have Captain Caldwell and the Delaware Blues up all night and engaged in cockfights with other American units and well, drinking, carousing, howling at the moon, etc.

Caldwell is definitively where the legend of the Blue Hen begins. The Delaware Blues did continue to distinguish themselves, again and again, and very much showed the ferocity of a gamecock in battle. Many years later, the first known time documented (pen to paper that is) is in the 1830s, they were recalled being the Delaware chicken's or the Blue Hens.

Over the years, these fighting cocks remained in the folklore of the state. On April 14, 1939, the "Blue Hen Chicken" was designated as the official state bird, formalizing the tradition which began in 1775.

The University of Delaware's College of Agriculture & Natural Resources maintains a breeding group of the Blue Hen Chicken on the campus farm.

#### Sources:

- Wikipedia, The Delaware Blue Hen.
- The Delaware Blue Hen, Fact and Fancy. University of Delaware, Department of Animal Science and Agricultural Biochemistry.
- Website <http://1stdelawareregiment.org/history/>



**Below: Delaware Chickens  
by Diane Jacky.**