

THE BUCKEYE



Above: Young cockerel. Photo: Jeffrey L. Lay

By Elly Vogelaar (NL)

*With my thanks to the American Buckeye Club,
Jeffrey L. Lay and Joe Schumaker.*

My attention was caught when I read the following on the website of the ALBC, the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy: "Buckeyes have a personality all their own. They are a very active fowl and are noted for being especially vigilant in the pursuit of mice, some breeders comparing them to cats in regard to this ability. They also seem to lack the tendency to feather-pick each other (this is a trait worthy of further exploration!). The males emit a full range of sounds beyond those typical of many other chicken breeds, including a dinosaur-like roar."

Although the ALBC is a reliable and highly valued organization, I thought it wise to check that latter remark with the people who should know best: the members of the American Buckeye Club.



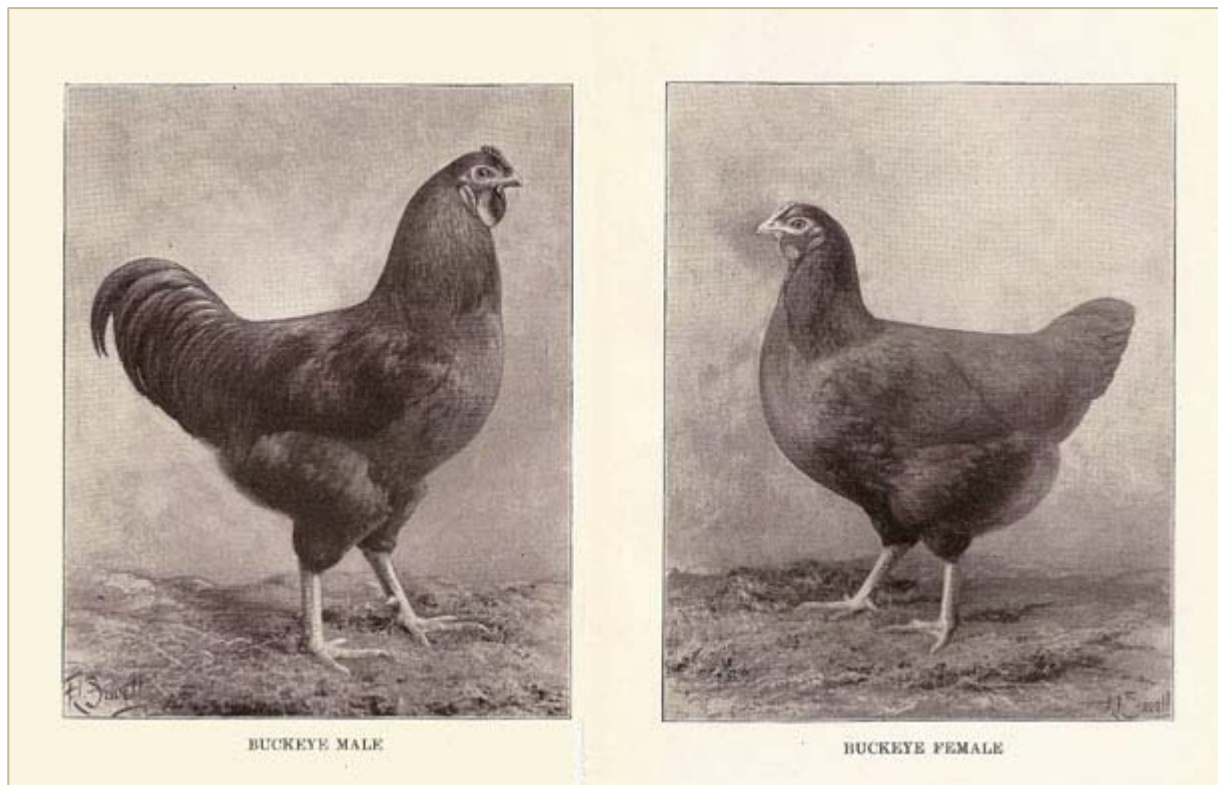
The American Buckeye Club was originally established by none other than Nettie Metcalf, photo to the left, founder of the Buckeye breed. Prior to The American Buckeye Club, Nettie had been a part of the 'National Red Feather Club' which included ALL breeds of poultry known as 'RED'S' back in the day! Nettie moved from Ohio to California in 1906 or 1907 for health reasons and both The American Buckeye Club and her beloved 'Buckeye Reds' struggled to survive. In 1915, there was a bit of resurgence in the club; a new President was elected and Nettie remained on board as 'Honorary President' for several years.

You can find her account and the TRUE history of the Buckeye breed that was first published in the 1916 edition of 'The American Buckeye Club Catalogue' online

on http://www.americanbuckeyeclub.org/About_Us.html

History of the breed

Mrs. Metcalf started with what would become the Buckeye chicken in the late 1880's, by crossing her Barred Rocks hens to a Buff Cochin cockerel, which however produced a big, lazy fowl, so she looked around for something else to mix in. She bought eggs from a breeder of B.B. Red Games, but his stock was not pure, yet very handsome birds. She raised some fine cockerels from the eggs, which she crossed upon her flock of hens. This mating produced a few red birds, something never seen around there before, and which aroused her ambition to try and reproduce them. However, the first flock she raised that year had green legs and feathered legs, buff chicks, black chicks and even red-and-black barred chicks; single combs and pea combs, and no combs at all, but fighters from way back. (She later found out the eggs of the black-breasted Red Games she had bought were mixed with the Indian Game and that was where she had obtained the pea comb.) Year after year they bred truer to the type she had in mind, which was a modified Cornish shape, with the very darkest of red plumage. Hens containing some black were not objectionable to her as long as the males kept that dark red shade she admired, and, with a pea comb; to her the finest of all combs. She decided to name the chickens: Buckeye Reds.



Above: Beautiful illustrations by Franklane L. Sewell, published in a 1910 poultry book of the American Poultry Association.

The other REDS

Late in 1896, after having made her mind to apply to have her breed admitted to the Standard as Buckeye Reds, Nettie Metcalf read an article describing the Rhode Island Reds, and for the first time she found that the red chicken idea was not original with her, but had been worked at down East since many years. She contacted leading breeders of Rhode Island Reds, who advised her to drop the name Buckeye Reds and call her chickens Rhode Island Reds too, as they seemed to think they were so very similar.

First she agreed, although because of the difference in shape and comb and depth of colour she was convinced that her Buckeyes ought to be bred to a different standard, and when the Rhode Island Red Club adopted the new standard, cutting out slate in the undercolour, she knew that new standard would

never do for Buckeyes. She felt sure that this dark pigment was necessary in order to retain the dark red plumage in the offspring. So she returned to the old standard and name of the Buckeye Reds. This old standard called for "a bar of slate across the feathers of the back, next to the surface colour, the rest of the undercolour being red."



Above: Buckeye rooster.
Left and below: Buckeye hen.
Birds and photos: Shumaker Farm.

Difference with Rhode Island Reds

According to Mrs. Metcalf, the Buckeye should be as much darker in colour than the accepted Rhode Island Red, as the Rhode Island Red is darker than the Buff breeds. *(Note: In those days the original colour of the RIR was much lighter than it is today.)* She stated: "Their plumage should be so dark as to make as to look almost black in some lights, garnet red being as near a description as I can give. The shape should resemble the Cornish Game, but the Buckeye is not so hard in feather and has more fluffiness of plumage, but not so much as the Rhode Island Red. The comb of the Buckeye is a pea comb, small and close fitting to the head, and the weight of the bird is much greater than is apparent from the size, although I personally much prefer a male weighing eight to nine pounds".



Today the Buckeyes are still unique in their body shape: slanted, short but broad back, very meaty thighs, powerful wings and breast. Its primary colour is a mahogany red with black tails. One of the things that makes the Buckeye

different from the RIR, is not often seen from the exterior: the dark undercolour beneath the back surface feathers. Some birds unfortunately lack this trait and other's maintain this feature throughout the bird. Below is a picture illustrating the 'bar of slate' that should be observed in ALL Buckeyes. The undercolour has to be closely monitored so that the dark colour doesn't 'bleed' onto the surface of the feather. The lighter coloured strains of Buckeyes often are missing this important breed feature. The Rhode Island Red's feathers should be red to the skin.



Above: The 'bar of slate' in the undercolour.

Photo: Shumaker Farm.

Right: This Shumaker Farm rooster is an excellent representation of the breed. He has won 4 American Championships at exhibitions with over 1200 birds.

Photo: Shumaker Farm.

Breed qualities

Due to their pea comb, combined with their stocky build, they are supremely cold hardy chickens. Since there is game bird in their makeup, they do better in free-ranging conditions, rather than total confinement.

When looking at a Buckeye's actual skin colour, it should be noted that a Buckeye's skin colour is yellow. The breeds that the Buckeye was developed from all have yellow skin. That being said, there will be different shades or depths of yellow that can be observed depending on the method the bird was raised.

Roosters weigh approximately nine



pounds and hens weigh approximately six and a half pounds; they are a dual purpose breed (good for both meat and eggs) and the hens are excellent egg producers of brown eggs. When they go broody, they are excellent sitters and mothers, although you will be happy to know that not all hens are very much inclined to broodiness.

On top of all this, the Buckeyes are of great beauty and make fine showbirds which compete very well at the American Shows. However, most newcomers will hatch a few chicks and expect them to ALL be 'show winners' but it just isn't that easy!



Right: Another Prize Winning rooster, produced by Shumaker Farm.



Above: Buckeye chicks at Crains Run Ranch. Photo: Jeffrey L. Lay.



Some believe the Buckeye name was given due to their deep, rich, dark mahogany colour, similar to the Buckeye nut, others believe the breed was named after the Buckeye State from whence they came... we may never know!

Photo: Fruits and seeds of the tree species *Aesculus glabra*, commonly known as Ohio buckeye, native primarily to this region of the United States.

The fruit capsule is light brown and contains just one seed, the colour of the seeds (buckeyes) is a bit darker than the European Horse Buckeye.



In 2011 the Buckeyes were upgraded from 'Critical' to 'Threatened'. (Threatened being defined by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy as: Fewer than 1,000 breeding birds in the United States, with seven or fewer primary breeding flocks, and estimated global population less than 5,000.



This dual-purpose breed is also included in the Slow Food USA Ark of Taste, a catalog of heritage foods in danger of extinction. See

http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/ark_product_detail/buckeye_chicken/



To end with

Finally, regarding the ALBC website.....we just shouldn't believe everything we read on the internet!

The Buckeyes are indeed noted for being particularly good 'mousers', but the Dinosaur Roar....

Jeffrey Lay of Crains Run Ranch, who has bred and raised Buckeyes for over a decade, finds their vocabulary isn't very different from other breeds.

Jeffrey: "The Aseel makes similar sounds and I raise other chickens that sound similar to my Buckeyes. Maybe since I've NEVER heard a Dinosaur Roar I'm not listening for the proper sound!"

Also Joe Shumaker of Shumaker Farm underlines that: "We have a few RIRs on our farm, but primarily focus on Aseels, Dark Cornish, and Buckeyes. As far as the 'dinosaur-roar'... Buckeyes will call out when picked up or handled but nothing out of the ordinary in comparison to many other breeds of poultry. It is a advertising technique (amongst others) that the ALBC has utilised to help increase interests in the breed."

So they succeeded and at least caught my attention! I am happy to have learned some more facts on this rare American breed, which is – probably – not kept by European fanciers.



Above: Rooster at Crains Run Ranch/Jeffrey L. Lay.

For those of you who are interested, I heartily recommend the American Buckeye Club Blog www.americanbuckeyeclub.blogspot.com which is updated frequently. Also click 'understanding The SOP' for an extended description of the wanted breed characteristics, completed with many photos to visualize each item.