

NORTH HOLLAND

BLUE



By: Elly Vogelaar.

Photos: Bert Wijtten, unless stated differently.

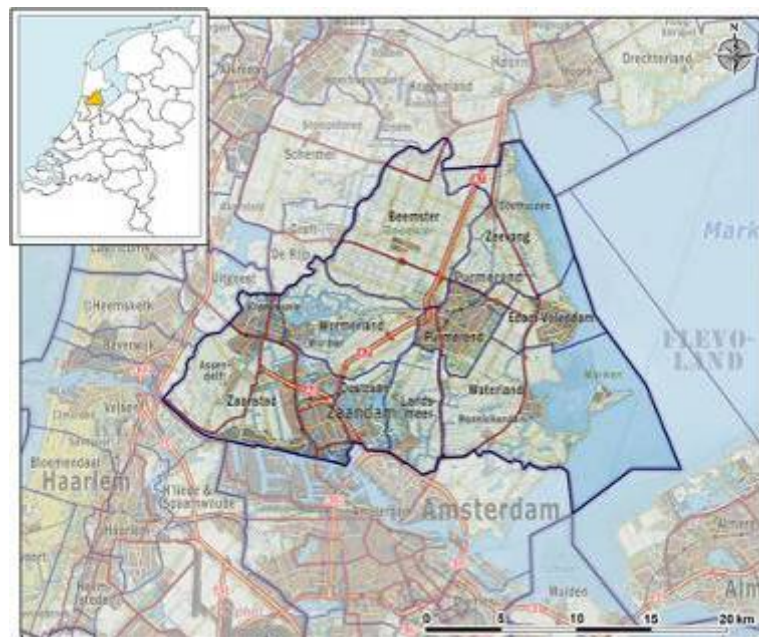
Although the official name of this breed is 'North Holland Fowl', most breeders – and even the Speciality Club – stick to the original name North Holland Blue. It is the only meat type breed of Dutch origin, created at the beginning of the 20th century by farmers and workmen in the Zaan district and Waterland region.

A bit of history

For centuries, the villages in this region were connected in a common struggle against the water. It was a wet and marshy area where agriculture was not possible, so that the farmers concentrated on livestock. Around 1900, a large part of the population earned their money by selling eggs. Duck eggs were most commonly sold, but many chickens were kept too. These were of indeterminate breeds and called 'Bezaansche chickens'.

Photo Wikipedia-Jan Willem van Aalst.

At that time some began to breed 'dual purpose' chickens, because apart from the eggs, on the market in Purmerend there was also strong demand for *poussins*—juvenile hens or roosters of about 1.5 kg—for consumption, mainly by



the inhabitants of the city of Amsterdam. So, early in the breeding season they used a light type of rooster in the breeding pens to breed hens for egg production. Later in the season, they chose a more stout type of cock to do the work, giving heavier offspring which were reared for the *poussin* market.



Above: Poultry market in Purmerend.

In those years there was much poverty; the peat became scarce and many people who worked in the bog lost their livelihood and had to look for other sources of income. Then in January 1916, the dikes breached, flooding a large area around the Zuiderzee. The region between Zaandam, Purmerend and Edam up to the IJ in Amsterdam were also submerged. By late-February the dikes were repaired, but it was months before the salt water had gone and the soil was somewhat dry again. Soon after that the country suffered a great feed shortage resulting in emergency feed distribution. Only very limited feed could be made available for poultry and livestock, so the farmers had to sell their birds, which yielded almost nothing. They were impoverished and most gave up completely.

In those days, a National Support Committee was established and the Government Information Service for Aviculture was founded with the aim to innovate and scientifically support Dutch poultry keepers. In 1919 the area asked for support. Van Gink, in the magazine *Avicultura* of 1920, described how aid got underway. A breeding station was built in the region, complete with chick rearing sheds and efficiently designed chicken coops. There was also a large incubator installed with a capacity of 1800 eggs (previously incubation had been done naturally with broody hens). Hatching eggs and chicks were supplied to all parts of the country. Moreover, there was maize provided. The breeding station contained white Leghorns, mottle and black Barnevelders, Waterland Yellow fowl in all their varieties, Buff Orpington ducks and white Indian Runner ducks. After a year the breeding station was extended and became self-sufficient, with the large scale breeding and selling of day-old layer chicks to farmers in the Waterland region.

They soon began to focus more on the 'meat type' birds. The laying capacity was well monitored—especially winter lay—because it was obviously important to have hatching eggs the whole year round. Thus there was a lot of experimenting

with different breeds. The now famous Belgian meat-type chicken, the Cuckoo Malines, was introduced into the region.

Right: *Poulet de Bruxelles*, drawing by L. v.d. Snickt.

These were the new famous Belgian meat-type chickens; very large chickens with feathered legs, created by crossing the 'old' cuckoo Malines with Asiatic breeds. At first they were named 'Poulet de Bruxelles' – Brussels chicken, later they were re-named in Cuckoo Malines and the original breed, that had been known under this name since 1800, was re-named Flanders Cuckoo.



However, the Malines did not thrive on the marshy ground. The breeders did not give up immediately and began mating the roosters to the existing (crossbred) hens that had already been proven to withstand the conditions in the region. It turned out to be a good match and the influence of the Malines cocks soon resulted in an increasing number of cuckoo-coloured chickens. Hence, the name 'North Holland Blue' came into vogue—the 'blue' because when viewed from a distance, the cuckoo plumage appeared blue.



In *Een Nieuwe Chronycke* (December 1995), Annie Pauw-Dekker, remembered her father who, several years after the First World War, was owed 100 guilders back wages. Instead of money, he was given 12 large blue hens and a Malines cock, with which he started his own poultry farm. She also describes how 21 eggs were always placed under the broody—they must have been large hens! The first hatchlings were immediately taken from the hen to give her more room to move. The chicks were wrapped in a woolen cloth and placed in the oven of the furnace—the door was kept open and eventually more chicks were added as they hatched.

In 1927, the North Holland farmers wanted their now famous 'Blue Chickens' to become a recognised breed. In *The Waterlander* newspaper of 15 October 1927 it is recorded that a meeting was arranged by C. Bankersen from Graftdijk, where the government's poultry consultant, Van Asperen Vervenne, asked what

they wanted—a meat-type bird that was a good layer, or a layer-type bird that doubled as a table fowl, as this would imply a much different breeding line. All participants voted in favour of the latter: a good laying hen, also yielding quality meat. Mr. Bankersen then gave an explanation on the old 'Bezaansche' chickens and the new Blue Hens and the first standard for the 'North Holland Blue' was drafted. Not surprisingly, the original standard differs from the current standard in only one respect: the legs were then 'slightly feathered'—something that would be a serious defect today.

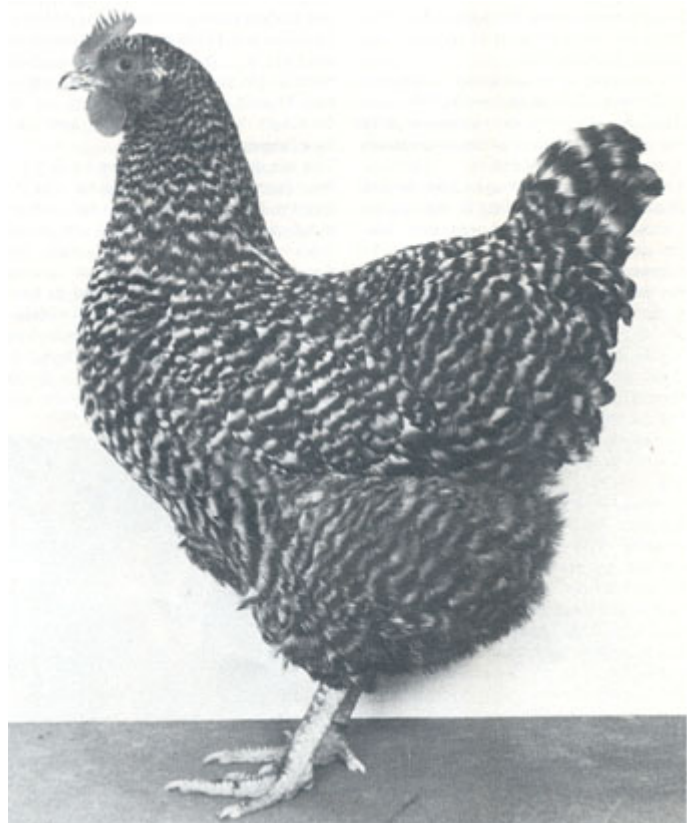
From about 1950, the North Holland Blue began to lose ground to the industrial poultry keeping that was focused on hybrid layers and broilers. It took the North Holland Blue *poussins* about 12-14 weeks before they could be sold for consumption—the new hybrid broilers reached the same slaughter weight in less than half the time. Nevertheless, the North Holland Blue were still bred as a pure breed—although no longer exclusively in North Holland—especially in Brabant and Limburg. The farms began specialising— some supplied hatching eggs, some sold day-old chicks and others specialised as rearing farms. In 1960, poultry meat production was from about two-thirds specific broiler hybrids and one third of North Holland Blues. Around this time some breeders improved their chickens by crossing other breeds, such as the light Sussex, in order to obtain more breast meat, which worked quite well. The chickens were still known for their good quality meat and the laying ability was quite good. Initially the hatching eggs were incubated in the Netherlands, and exported as day-old chicks. Later this changed, with the hatching eggs going straight abroad—particularly to Belgium. Until the 1970s the North Holland Blue fowl was still commercially bred—then suddenly it was all over. Since then they have almost exclusively been kept by hobby breeders. A few commercial breeders, such as fowl specialist Paul de Wit & Zn from St. Laureins in Belgium lately reintroduced North Holland Blues onto the (Dutch) market—often in up-market restaurants—which has been well-received.

Right: A North Holland Blue hen, in 1983.

Photo: Bas Vingerhoed-ANHBC.

The North Holland Blue today

The North Holland Blue is a heavy, solid built chicken (weight for the male 3.5 to 4 kg and for the female 2.75 to 3.25 kg) with a wide and deep chest and rump. The abdomen is broad and deep, with full down. The head is large and bright red and has a straight, single comb; an almost white beak; red lobes; and large, orange-red eyes. The tail is carried fairly high and open, of medium length and neatly covered by the sickles and coverts. The skin is white and the legs are flesh-coloured to light gray, however in young females a somewhat darker tint may be present. They are clean legged. The egg colour is light brown.





Cuckoo

The base colour of each feather is dark blue-grey interspersed with three or four slightly curved bars of light blue-grey. The edges between the ground colour and barring is indistinct. There are more bars in the tail feathers and hackles relative to the length of these feathers. The barring in the neck and saddle hackles is almost V-shaped. The barring should be even all over the body. The undercolour is a light blue-grey.

The colour of the female is similar to that of the male, however appears darker because the light barring is narrower, so the feathers show more of the dark ground colour. Homozygous males have the cuckoo gene double, resulting in a barring twice as broad as in the females. Moreover the feather tips of the cock's feathers are light coloured while the hens have feathers with a dark tip; this is also gives an optically darker appearance.

Right: NHB feathers, left to right: hen feather with dark tip; cock feather with light tip and a hackle feather.

An extra feature is that you can immediately see whether the chicks are male or female; the male chicks are in fact lighter than the females, with lighter down and lighter legs. Often the male chicks have a larger light spot on the head than the pullets.

Bert Wijten, who has been breeding North Holland Blues for many years, says he can only tell the chicks apart—with any certainty—for at most, 20 per cent of the time. However, at four weeks of age the sexes of the chicks are 100 per cent apparent.





Above: This is not a correct cuckoo marking too much a 'dot' instead of a barring. (Photo ANHBC)



Left: Proper wing marking.

The difference between cuckoo and barred.

Both are the same Gene: the Barring gene B is sex-linked, which is why the males—having two copies—have more white in them. The females can only have one gene and are therefore darker.

This gene stops and starts pigment production in feather growth, resulting in the well-known barring pattern as seen on Barred Wyandottes and other normal feathering chickens.

However, when on a rapid feathering breed, the same barring gene ('B') gives wide, coarse, fuzzy "Cuckoo Barring" as seen on Cuckoo Marans, North Holland Blue and others. The 'widest' bars are seen on the most rapid growing feathers, such as the primaries.

Cuckoo birds usually carry a more smudgy, improper type barring. The bars are not nearly as perfect and the difference between the dark and light bars is not as distinct; being more charcoal-coloured with smeared edges. These type bars are not straight but arched, even V-shaped in the tail feathers and hackle.

Without the barring gene, all barred and cuckoo breeds would be self-black. The B-gene has greater pigment-restricting effect on black pigment than it does on red or gold pigment. When the barring gene is applied to the Wild Type pattern, the Crele variety is produced.

Note: The extremely narrow and sharp barring seen on the Barred Plymouth Rocks is achieved by the B-gene plus the presence of the gene ('K') for very slow feathering growth, which allows for a lot of on/off sequences in the time it takes for a feather to grow.

Breeding the North Holland Blue

While it may seem so, it is not that easy to breed a good North Holland Blue. The breed has many challenges—loose feathering; too much fluff; poorly shaped tails; the backs too short; or the wings are carried too low. Then there are the double challenges of colour and the cuckoo marking. Many strains suffer from 'rust', which is a brownish haze, mostly on the back and shoulders in the hens

and a yellowish discolouration in the hackles of the males (however, this may also be caused by excessive exposure to sunlight).

There must also be sufficient contrast between light and dark colour. Roosters are always lighter in colour than the females, which is clearly described in the standard and quite rightly so. There is no need to use separate lines for cock and hen breeding. Almost entirely white feathers in the sickles and wings are not acceptable and males carrying this fault are not suitable for showing.

Bert Wijtten does not even like such a rooster in the breeding pen, saying when they are too light, too much of the marking of the marking is lost in the offspring. They can occasionally be used for breeding for a specific reason, however the resulting hens will be a little brighter in colour and often have better leg colour.



Bert has three breeding pens, each with separate runs. When selecting the birds for breeding, the colour is but one aspect. That is simple, he says: a good show bird for colour, is also a good breeder. But the type is also very important, they must be robust chickens, with the right wing

and tail carriage. The comb serrations should be correct as comb faults are hereditary. In addition, it is important not to neglect the laying capability of the strain.



He likes to have chicks early in the season and at the time of our conversation—in February—he already had 31 already on the ground. Early chicks have enough time to grow and be ready for the young bird shows. As with all better meat breeds the pullets should mature in five months, but despite being a fast feathering breed, the males need one to two months more to fully develop their sickles. Compared to breeds such as Plymouth Rocks—an extra slow feathering breed) this is still quite fast.



Nature of the breed

Of course, even though North Holland Blues are no longer primarily selected for their utility qualities, but for appearance, the hens still lay very well (although obviously less during winter). Bert especially appreciates the quiet character of the breed. While the North Holland Blue is not a flighty breed-by nature, it is always a credit to the breeder himself when his birds are not shy.

The hens go broody quite easily, he says—in fact a bit too easy. By setting them apart immediately at the first signs of broodiness—in a place without a nest and eggs—they soon go back to

laying, but some hens are stubborn and go broody up to three times in a row. It may differ per strain though, and for another breeder, broodiness may be a positive trait, especially because they make wonderful mothers due to their large size and full down.



Excess roosters make very good table fowls and even older hens—when the laying capacity has diminished—are said to give very fine meat of a good weight. The Wijtten family do not eat their own birds—all excess chickens go to a nearby care farm. This care farm keeps only North Holland Blue chickens and when grown out, the cockerels are butchered and sold. This is fine with Bert, as long as he doesn't have to eat them.

This breed has no special demands on keeping and rearing although the young birds should be given sufficient room to prevent feather pecking. They thrive best when provided with ample space, preferably free-range on a grassy lawn or meadow.

Showing

Some 10 years ago the Food and Agricultural Organisation invited the Dutch Government to produce a report regarding the animal genetic resources of our country. The invitation was taken up with vigour and the (former) *Avicultura* magazine surveyed the specialty clubs of all the various Dutch breeds. At the time of the survey, there were 45 breeders of North Holland Fowl, which was about the same number as for Barnevelders and Welsummers—yet we see them less often at shows.

Lately, exposure in glossy gardening magazines has given North Holland Blues some more fans—mostly people who want some chickens in their backyard—but unfortunately, these people seldom exhibit their birds. More competition is always good for any breed. Membership of a club is also important for getting breeding advice and sharing birds and experiences with other breeders. Even so, it is nice that this ancient breed is again finding a place in the backyards of chicken lovers.



**Right and below:
Outstanding male and
female North Holland
Blue, according to the
Dutch Standard.**

Photos: Klaas van der Hoek.



Bert Wijtten does take his chickens to the young animal day and to the show, but limits these activities to only three times a year. Of course it is nice to know your birds meet the standard requirements. It is even better when they are good enough to be chosen best large fowl of the show, which happened for Bert in 2009, with his young hen winning Champion Large Fowl at his club, Fur and Feather in Mill.

Cuckoo coloured chickens do not require washing before a show, it suffices to clean their feet and rub a little grease into the comb to enhance the bright red colour.

It can be difficult to have fully grown cocks in time for the show—the early broods often being disappointing because of low fertility and later broods being too late to have fully matured cockerels in show season.

Right: Champion hen by Bert Wijtten.

Abroad

In its hey-day, the North Holland Blues were also exported, but overseas they are only kept as fancy chickens.

In *Germany* they were almost immediately changed into the German breed 'Niederrheiner blausperber'—an almost identical chicken of the cuckoo colour variety, without leg feathering. (They are also recognized in other colours.) In turn, North Holland Blue bantams have been created by using cuckoo Niederrheiner bantams. This German breed resembles our North Holland Blues so closely, that the cuckoo Niederrheiner large fowls and bantams are not recognised in the Netherlands.

North Holland Blues were introduced into *France* in 1936, and commercially bred for a long time. They were also exported from France to Africa. In France the breed is called La Bleue de Hollande. There are now only a handful hobby breeders.

Around 1929, the North Holland Blue with slightly feathered legs were imported into the *United Kingdom*. The cuckoo Marans had been imported at the same time, which had slightly feathered legs too.

Below: North Holland Blue in England. Photo: Michael Hart.



Michael Hart from Great Britain, breeder of this breed, contributed the following lines: *"North Holland Blues were once in favour as dual purpose birds by small scale commercial farmers in the UK. Their popularity is thought to have peaked in 1951 but they disappeared from the farms in the 1970s, along with most other pure breeds, to make way for the commercial hybrids. Today they are only kept by a small handful of passionate backyard breeders.*

They started becoming popular in the 1930s because of their heavy body weights, quick maturing, white flesh and reasonable egg laying ability. Also, their Dutch origins gave them a tolerance to the wet conditions that often exist where large numbers of fowl run together.



Left: A North Holland Blue cockerel in Great Britain, owner Gabrielle Savage.

One of the first commercial flocks was set up in 1938 in Kent. By this time the feathered legs that came from their Malines make up had largely been bred out of them in the Netherlands. So when the British poultry farmers started importing batches of chicks, they found that only a percentage of these still had some light feathering on their legs and, with the demands of the table fowl market in mind, they followed their Dutch counterparts and selected against feathered legs.

But, nowadays, all North Holland Blues in Britain ARE feather legged. Interestingly, this came about because the standards committee of The Poultry Club, who were

responsible for drawing up breed standards, feared that show judges would not be able to tell the difference from the similarly marked and recently standardised (clean-legged) Marans; by adopting feathered legs the risk of any possible confusion would be overcome !

Perhaps the reason they are not popular with exhibition breeders is that there is no real love for a rather sloppily marked cuckoo variety, when really smart barring can be shown off in breeds such as the Plymouth Rock and Wyandotte.

There is no breed club for North Holland Blues in the UK and any that are shown come under the wing of the Rare Breeds Society."

Right: One of Michael Hart's old North Holland Blue hens. Note the foot feathers!



The egg colour was useful to distinguish between the two breeds, but this could not be ascertained by looking at the males. It was then decided to breed the Marans with clean legs and the North Holland Blue with feathered legs. Choosing the Marans without and the North Holland Blue with feathered legs now may seem bizarre and illogical, but in those days both breeds were rare and unknown. In the Netherlands the leg feathering was later bred out for practical reasons, because of the marshy ground where the birds were often kept. The first Marans—then named 'Marandaïses', with slightly feathered legs—were seen for the first time in the Netherlands in 1938 at the *Avicorni exhibition* in The Hague.

In *America* and *New Zealand*, North Holland Blues are a rather unknown fancy breed. They have been introduced into New Zealand as a hobby breed and will be recognised according to the Dutch standard, thus standardising the clean (not feathered) legs. Currently, in Britain there is now a push to change the standard to recognise clean legs, especially since the Marans with foot feathering is also recognised there now.

(Our team members in Australia have never seen or heard of Holland Blues in Australia.)

To end with

A study* was done in 2000, at the Wageningen UR Livestock Research (NL), on the feasibility of breeding the North Holland Blue as a commercial utility chicken, in order to utilise the male chicks rather than killing them (as is done in laying hybrids). Roosters of laying strains of about 2 kg live weight clearly differ in form and taste from regular chickens. The males are longer and narrower than the broilers and have a clearly visible and protruding keel (chicken breast).

Because they are butchered at a later age than the broilers, they have a more pronounced chicken flavour. Growing out roosters of laying breeds and successfully marketing them to consumers better fits in with the culinary tradition in southern countries, than with ours—exploiting the roosters depends on adapting our culinary customs. It would be possible in a few years, with some genetic influence of the Malines



Fowl, to build up a population North Holland Blue, where the hens lay 250 eggs per year and the males—with an acceptable feed conversion—weigh well over two kilograms. The cost per egg and per kilogram of meat will be somewhat higher, so it will once again depend on whether the consumer is willing to pay a bit more for a better product.



(*Source: Rapport 261 - Verkenning van de marktkansen voor een combi-kip in Nederland. Wageningen UR Livestock Research, Auteurs F.R. Leenstra, P. van Horne en M.M. van Krimpen.)

North Holland Blues are also recognised in bantam form—only in the cuckoo colour, same as the large fowl. Specialty club: Assendelfter & Noord-Hollandse Blauwenclub. Website <http://www.anhbc.nl/>

Below: Large Fowl and Bantam. Photo: Klaas van der Hoek.



Thanks to the Specialty Club and to Bert Wijtten, for the beautiful photos and information on the present North Holland Blue, and also about the commercial poultry keeping 60 years ago.

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