



An Iowa Blue rooster stares down the camera at the farm of Curt Burroughs outside of Cedar Rapids on Saturday, November 23, 2013. Originally bred in Decorah, IA the Iowa Blue is the only chicken solely developed in Iowa. After nearly going extinct in the 1980's numbers have steadily increased due to enthusiasm from breeders here in Iowa and elsewhere. With two variations of the species: 'Silver Penciled' and 'Birchen,' most attribute the Iowa Blue with a temperate demeanor around humans, yet are still the only breed of chicken in the world to fight-off a hawk. Benjamin Roberts / Iowa City Press-Citizen

Iowa born & bred

*Written by Aly Brown Iowa City Press-Citizen
Nov. 30, 2013*

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Iowa Blue quick facts

- It is the only chicken breed developed in Iowa, originally bred by a Decorah farmer.
- Iowa Blues were nearly extinct in the 1980s, but flock numbers have slowly increased.
- The Iowa Blue chicken is named for the hen's bluish appearance from a distance.
- The Iowa Blue is a dual-purpose chicken, equally good for eggs and meat.
- Iowa Blues are gentle with humans, but are the only breed of chicken that will fight a hawk.
- While Iowa Blues aren't yet recognized by the American Poultry Association, the Iowa Blue Chicken Club is working toward certification.
- Iowa Blues aren't standardized, but two main variations are highly sought after: the original Silver Penciled and Birchen.
- Iowa Blue hens are excellent mothers, and will "go broody" with no issue.

Like John Wayne, Eskimo Pie and the Gallup poll, Iowans are proud of Iowa-born. We build museums and host festivals to celebrate minor references in Star Trek. We relish wearing our Hawkeye gear outside of the stadium, and we are quick to correct those who think we only grow corn. But why don't we celebrate the Iowa Blue chicken, the only breed of chicken developed in the state? The Iowa Blue Chicken Club hopes to change your mind, one chick at a time.

Curt Burroughs, a Palo-based breeder and club historian, purchased his first Iowa Blues a decade ago when the breed was on the verge of extinction. Only two of six chicks survived the shipment, a male and female, which grew to a flock of 20. Burroughs said he sold the flock when he briefly moved to Virginia. He came back to the breed when he saw the

newly formed Iowa Blue Chicken Club was attempting to standardize a Texas-crossbreed, turned black from breeding outside the genetic line.

“I knew right away it was not an Iowa Blue,” Burroughs said. “I told them, ‘You give me two weeks to find evidence the bird should be blue-gray at a distance, not black.’”

Burroughs returned with a lengthy historical treatise, beginning the standardization of Iowa’s chicken.

Birth of a breed

John Logsdon, a Decorah farmer known for experimentation with livestock genetics, wanted a chicken that could handle extreme Iowa summers and winters. His chickens bred for the cold in Minnesota or Wisconsin would stroke in the heat, and breeds developed in California would freeze. While the origins of the breed are fuzzy, Logsdon purportedly created the breed in the early 1920s by breeding a cross of a Chinese cock pheasant with a Black Minorca hen and a Rhode Island hen. By breeding for each chicken’s best characteristics, Logsdon created a hardy, brave chicken equally good on the table and for laying eggs.

Logsdon’s breed grew in popularity among state hatcheries, but fell into obscurity when the last known hatchery to carry the breed shuttered in 1972, according to Burroughs’ “History and Characteristics of the Iowa Blue.” Burroughs writes that the industrialization of America’s food supply in the 1950s shifted the consumer mentality from self-sufficiency to convenience and thriftiness.

“This shift from local, home-raised poultry to supermarket-ready birds raised in an industrial environment took its toll on many local as well as nationally-recognized breeds,” he writes. Without a demand from consumers or admittance into the Standard of Perfection, Iowa Blues could neither thrive on the farm nor in the show ring. By 1989, Burroughs writes, the breed withered to two flocks: one old and infertile, the other belonging to Ransome Bolson. “Every Iowa Blue in the nation traces back to Ransome’s flock,” Burroughs said.

Revival of the Iowa Blue

Kent Whealy, co-founder of Seed Savers Exchange and an avid conservationist, took the breed under his wing and purchased several dozen hatching eggs from Bolson. Whealy bred his resulting chicks, selling hatching eggs to several breeders who disseminated their stock. But, after being crossbred with so many varieties, the Iowa Blue experienced what Burroughs calls a “genetic bottleneck,” where the breed began to lose “the characteristics that make the Iowa Blue unique among chicken-dom.”

Out of this conservation effort emerged two colorations of Iowa Blue chickens: Birchen and Silver Penciled, the original variety. Silver Penciled Iowa Blue roosters’ heads are silvery white, leading into a silvery white and black-laced body. The tails are a lustrous black with a blue sheen, matching the laced breast. Hens have similar, stippled gray appearance. Birchens, a more recent product of crossbreeding, have a largely black appearance with the breed’s characteristic lacing.

While Burroughs said club breeders are selecting for Silver Penciled coloration, maintaining the breed’s disposition is paramount. “They are so inquisitive, and they are so unique in how they behave,” he said. “They don’t behave like chickens. They do, but they don’t.” Like a cat,

Iowa Blues will cock their tail to the side when they're curious. When you lift the lid off of a box of chicks, they pop up like exploding popcorn. They're also the only known chicken in the world that will fight a hawk. "They puff out their chest almost like they're daring it to try, 'Just try me,'" Burroughs said. "They'll flop on their back and lock talons with the hawk, and there is dust and feathers flying and awful noises, but they hold their own."

Kari McKay-Widdel, vice president of the Iowa Blue Chicken Club and a Belle Plaine-based breeder, said even though the breed will fight predators such as snakes and foxes, they are the "sweetest birds I've had."

Amber O'Harrow, a local artist, was so inspired by the chicken's rotund shape and "haughty" attitude that she forged a six-foot tall metal sculpture of a hen as part of a sculptural collection at Iowa River Landing. "Humans relate to chickens in two ways," O'Harrow said. "We love them as a beautiful creature, and we love them as dinner." O'Harrow, who owns three Iowa Blues, wanted to create a sculpture that celebrated and "reinvigorated" the breed's original purpose: food. "Chickens do have a purpose other than being fluffy," she said. "We can give them a good life, if we could all get back to the mindset of having a good, healthy farm."

Quest for standardization

McKay-Widdel said the club's true function is achieving breed standardization from the American Poultry Association. To do so, the club must present five breeders with affidavits affirming they have bred Iowa Blues for at least five years. During these years, breeders must show a certain number of chickens, exposing the breed to judges' certification. Finally, the club must present 50 birds at a qualifying show that all display the same genetic traits, which is at least two years away, McKay-Widdel said.

The club currently is trying to get the bird in as many hands as possible, with the hopes that the breed will continue to thrive. By standardizing the breed, the Iowa Blue's original colorization and characteristics will be maintained, nearly 100 years later. "If we can do that, the breed will take care of itself," Burroughs said.

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