On the wild side

The original form of chicken plumage, known as wild type, is proudly intrinsic in the South Asian Red Jungle Fowl, explains Grant Brereton, and the good news is that there are plenty of available varieties to choose from.

It is common to refer to a cockerel as traditionally coloured, which invariably (but perhaps not so obviously) describes a beautiful combo of black and red feathering. Even people who aren’t into chickens often have their homes adorned with traditionally-coloured cockerels and hens – on mugs, in paintings, on cushions and on all manner of homewares. So, what exactly do we mean by a traditionally-coloured male? Well, the breast, thigh, tail and wing bar areas are all black, while the neck and saddle hackles are bright orange, which turns to a deeper shade of red on the shoulder and across the back, with a triangular-shaped brown wing bar to finish off.

The corresponding females aren’t anywhere near as attractive. They have salmon-coloured breasts and yellow hackles interspersed with black/brown pigment. Their backs are brown and fuzzy marked, which also runs into their thighs. This is known as stippling, and, as with Peafowl and many other avian species, the females are relatively dull in comparison to their handsome male counterparts – no doubt for the purposes of camouflage while sitting on their nests of eggs.

RED JUNGLE FOWL

This traditional colouring is beautiful in the flesh, and is aptly named because the Red Jungle Fowl — the proposed ancestor of all poultry varieties — is coloured in this way. It was evolutionary scientist Charles Darwin who believed that all chickens of the day descended from the indigenous, South East Asian jungle fowl, which lived naturally in forest habitats and had a very distinctive call. Unlike domesticated chickens, pure Red Jungle Fowls have great flight capabilities. They can fly for hundreds of yards, over lakes and rivers, and are said to be more related to a pheasant as opposed to a chicken. Pure Red Jungle Fowls, in their natural habitat stretching from India to South East Asia and bordering islands, are considered to be nearly extinct. These birds interbreed freely with domestic chickens, which has been a major contributor in their demise.

In captivity, pure Red Jungle Fowls are extremely rare. An abundance of birds are claimed to be pure Red Jungle Fowls, but few are uncontaminated by domestic chickens.

USE IN GENETICS

Because of their natural forest habitats, Red Jungle Fowl-coloured chickens tend to be referred to as wild type or black-reds. And anyone who understands genetics at a basic level will know that having a wild type on which to base a whole genome is essential in determining whether different traits are natural or regarded as mutations. In other words, if non-feathered legs are found in Red Jungle Fowls it could be assumed that feathered legs in chickens are a naturally occurring mutation.

BREED OPTIONS

If you fancy a wild type, traditionally-coloured chicken, the good news is that there are plenty of available varieties to choose from, even though different breeds seem to have their own names for what are ultimately variations on a theme. In the Welsummer breed there is no specific name for the plumage — so Welsomers can be thought of as traditionally-coloured. This is a great breed that lays a good number of dark brown eggs.

In the Leghorn breed the wild-type plumage is known as brown, but the breasts of males tend to be solid black, as opposed to the leaky orange ones of some Welsummer males. (There are also variations in hue in the red feather regions, as well as the degree of black pigment in...
Will My Birds Breed True?

TRUE BREEDING?
The good news is that the wild type plumage breeds true. If this isn't the case, then you should question your breeding stock and the vendor from whom you purchased them. However, the chances of not producing true-to-form offspring in the wild type varieties are slim, regardless of traditionally-coloured Red Jungle Fowl plumage, or its silver alternative, Silver Duckwing.

WHAT IS BREEDING TRUE?
If a variety of pure-breed poultry breeds ‘true’ then it produces offspring consistent with its own features, ranging from comb right through to plumage colour/pattern, in male and female respectively. In basic terms, the sons should all look similar to their father, and the daughters similar to their mother. And you would be forgiven for thinking that this is a prerequisite of being bestowed the honourable title of ‘pure breed’, but this isn’t necessarily the case. Some colour options across the different chicken varieties won’t breed true, which is also the case for certain physical features we find in our chickens in the exhibition world; an example being really short legs. Sometimes nature won’t allow certain factors to ‘lock in’ because it would be to the detriment of survival.

All about Grant Brereton
Grant Brereton, the former editor of Fancy Fowl magazine, has been a regular contributor to Country Smallholding since 2009, plus he is a lifelong poultry-keeper, journalist and author. A sought-after judge, he has worked hard to promote pure-breed preservation over many years, and describes himself as ‘chicken obsessed’. Regarded as the UK’s leading authority on plumage genetics, he has lectured both here and abroad on the subject.