Crèvecœur Chicken Profile

**Breed Status**

**Breed name:** Crèvecœur

**Other Names:** Black Polish, Picardy, Normandy

**Livestock Conservancy Status:** Critical

**Status Comments:** New interest in this breed is beginning to develop in the U.S., France, England, and Australia.

**Country/region of origin:** France/Normandy

**U.S. Population:** < 500 breeding birds

**Global population:** <1000

**Breed purpose:** Meat and egg production

**Breed type:** Standard

**Bloodlines:**
- historic – Henwood, Urch
- modern – Ideal, Abeln

**Foundation breeds used to create breed:** Unknown. Very old fowl thought to descend from a cross of common hens from Normandy.

**Breed History**

The Crèvecœur chicken is among the oldest of the standard-bred fowls of France and the longest known French breed in the United Kingdom. The breed gets its name from the village of Crèvecœur en Auge in Normandy, France. “Crève Cœur” translates literally as “broken heart.”
Local history sites the origin of the name stems from the land in this region being less fertile than was hoped by farmers moving in to the area and thus breaking the hearts of the peasants. Little is known of the breed’s origins other than they were developed in Normandy and existed there for a very long time. By the twelfth century the Crèvecœur was known as a source of pride by the Lord of Crèvecœur-en-Auge. Historic tenant contracts indicated that to pay their rent on their farm, farmers had to provide two finished Crèvecœur capons to the landowner each year. This clearly shows the value of this breed to the locals! By the eighteenth century, Crèvecœur capon was a preferred meat of the upper middle class in Paris. More than 150,000 were produced for this market annually. French poultry author Charles Jacque wrote in his 1858 book, *Le Poulaiier*, “This admirable race produces certainly the most excellent fowls that appear in the markets of France. Its bones are even lighter than those of the Houdan; its flesh is fine, short, whiter, and it takes more easily to the fattening process. The chickens are of an unheard-of precocity; they are ready to fattening when they have attained two months and a half or three months, and for eating fifteen days after.”

American Stock Journal 1870
The Crèvecoeur had reached America by 1852 (Livestock of the Farm, 1916) at a time when French breeds were becoming the rage in the country. According to the American Agriculturist (October 1867) “The Crevecoeurs Fifteen Years in This Country – We found, a few days since, with surprise and pleasure, a fine flock of fowls bearing an unmistakable likeness to the fashionable “Creves” on the farm of Mr. J.P. Swain, of Westchester Co. The Johnie-Crapeau style and air of the cocks, their split combs, the top-knots, the tendency to muffle or ruffle, the color, and the character of the hens as persistent layers class them unmistakably as, at least, closely akin to the Crevecoeurs. The original stock was purchased by Capt. Funk, of the old line of Havre packets, under the name of “Layers,” (Pondeuse,) at Havre. Two importations were made of twenty and thirty-six birds respectively, but few of either importations survived, or long survived, the passage. Their descendants, however, are hardy and healthy, and Mr. S. [Saunders] gives them credit of being the hardiest and best hens for eggs he has ever had, although he has bred almost all the famous varieties, importing them from both Europe and Asia.”

In 1867 imports were made by A.M. Halstead and Mr. Saunders of New York and by Benjamin Haines of Elizabeth, NJ. All got their stock from the Jardin d’Acclimation in Paris. (American Agriculturist March 1867) Further imports occurred around the beginning of the 1870’s also from the Jardin d’Acclimation in Paris. (American Stock Journal, 1870) In France they were still quite popular at the time. One notable distinction for the breed occurred in 1889 when there were two sets of awards offered for poultry at the first Exhibition Universelle (World’s Fair) held in Paris. One was reserved for the Crèvecoeur and the other for all the other chicken breeds at the exposition!

The Crèvecoeur remained popular up until the early 20th century in France. In 1909 poultry author Willis Grant Johnson wrote “When staying in St. Servan, Dinan, and St. Malo a few years since, I noticed that the Crèvecoeur was the principal fowl offered for sale in the market, where they were mostly bought alive, and if unsold carried home, to possibly reappear on a future day.” He also mentions in regards to capons that “In Paris the finest of the “Crêves” realize as much as from twenty to twenty-five franc each, while from three to five dollars is not an uncommon price in New York. The French capon, when really good, is
in its way the perfection of poultry.” (The Poultry Book, 1909) To put things in perspective, in today’s currency that price is equivalent to $100-$125 per bird!

Things changed dramatically for the Crèvecoeur when in 1940 the German army reached Normandy during WWII. The soldiers wished to eat as the middle-class French did so military bursars were tasked with collecting as many Crèvecoeur chickens as possible for their tables. Within two years, nearly all of the birds were eaten leaving only a scant few hidden away by dedicated farmers. Today they are still critically endangered but new interest is emerging in France, the U.S., and Australia to bring back this historic breed back to the culinary world.

The breed was developed principally for the quality of its flesh. Crèvecoeur chickens have small, fine bones and the proportion of meat to offal (edible internal organs) is high. Their skin is white and their legs are dark leaden blue. The breast meat is noted for being fine, short, and very white while the leg meat is very dark and almost duck-like in color. Crèvecoeur chickens grow slowly, reaching mature size in about 10-12 months although modern producers observe that the roosters seem to reach their full glory in appearance at two years of age. The breed fattens readily and was a French favorite to “gaver” or stuff – an old traditional practice of making birds eat more by inserting a tube into their mouths much like is done with geese and ducks to produce fois gras. This was done one month prior to butchering the birds.

Another historic fattening method involved confinement and intermittent light cycles throughout the day. They were fed a specially blended wet mash including whey and malted oats along with other items (to this day kept a local secret by Norman producers) to develop a fine carcass for the table.

In the U.S. they are mostly found to be solid black in color but recently the blue, white, and splash varieties has been imported from France in 2017. The black birds have a beautiful beetle green sheen that can be seen on the crests, hackles, and tail feathers of the roosters. In the 19th century long time British poultry breeder, Mr. W. Blinkhorn, wrote of the breed “Crèvecœurs have been described as black or black and white variegated. This variegation, sometimes white and sometimes golden, is most noticeable in the crest, and after that in the hackles and saddles, but I have never seen it in other parts of the birds. I scarcely remember a bird that did not show it more or less the second year, and as they grow older it increases. I have seen good combs of both varieties – two-horned and antlered – and think both are common to the breed; but the former are more general and I think preferable.” (The Book of Poultry, 1886) Of the color in very young birds Willis Grant Johnson writes “in color they are black, with white on the breast; and in their first feathering they not unfrequently have white in the wings and tail, which generally is moulted out in the nest, and they become a soft, clean, uniform black.” (The Poultry Book, 1909)

Crèvecoeur chickens should have crests and beards of moderate size, compact, well-proportioned bodies, and short legs. Traditionally their crests and beards, being smaller,
did not restrict their vision as the crests do on the Polish chicken breed but the show ring has encouraged more profuse crests in recent decades. They have “v” combs but “leaf” or “stag” combs are known to occur occasionally within the breed. In movement they are quiet and deliberate. The breed stands confinement remarkably well, appearing quite content. Crèvecœur chickens are moderate layers of large white eggs. They were noted by both English and American poultry men as being rather delicate in constitution and prone to catch colds in damp conditions although modern breeders find them to be more robust. Crèvecœur chickens are easily reared on any moderately dry soils. They do seem to exhibit digestive systems that can be a bit more sensitive than other breeds. It’s recommended that when in stressful situations or weather extremes, use of probiotics prophylactically may be of benefit to the birds.

The Crèvecœur chicken was recognized by the American Poultry Association and admitted in 1874. Males should weigh 8 lbs and females weigh 6.5 lbs. as adults but many in the U.S. have become much smaller over time. Attention should be given to returning the breed to standard weight and conformation.

**Physical Description and Breed Characteristics**

**Unique breed characteristics:** Black crests, full beards, and plumage, and short legs on a compact Dorking-like body.

**General description:** Full, well curved tail; medium sized v-shaped comb; highly arched nostrils; eyes reddish bay; beak black, shading to horn at tip; shanks and toes dark leaden blue.

**Age of maturity (M/F):** 12 months – 2 years

**Mature weight range (M/F):** 8 lbs. (3.63 kg) / 6.5 lbs. (2.95 kg)

**Colors (M/F):** predominantly black in the U.S. but blue, white, and splash varieties were recently imported from France in 2017.

**Temperament (M/F):** Calm and deliberate, occasional aggression in males should be culled

**Flocking/ranging behavior:** This breed is stands confinement remarkable well. It is poor to moderate at ranging, individuals remain close to the flock while ranging, can be easy target for predators.

**Regional adaptations:** Suited to any moderately dry, well-drained soils.

**Faults to avoid:** Avoid under sized fowls; shanks and toes other than black or dark leaden blue in color; more than one-half inch of positive white in any part of the
plumage; two or more feathers tipped in white, except in crest. Individuals aggressive toward people should be culled.

### Production Traits

**Age of sexual maturity (M/F):** 6 months/ 6 months.

**Length of breeding season:** December – June, may be longer in cooler climates

**Breeding seasonality:** breeding diminished in late fall

**Expected longevity:** 7-9 years

**Optimal breeding ratio of males to female:** 1 male to 4-8 females

**Incubation period:** 21 days

**Mate bonding:** none observed

**Rate of lay (# eggs/ year):** 120-150

**Egg color and size:** white to tinted, medium to large in size

**Fertility:** fair to excellent depending on bloodline

**Hatchability:** 70-75+%,

**Hatch weight:** 30-35 gms

**Maternal capacity:** non-broody

**Feed requirements:** Similar to the majority of breeds, fertility may be improved by feeding a vitamin and mineral fortified breeding ration at least one month prior to collecting eggs for hatching. They seem to have more sensitive digestive systems than other breeds so using a probiotic prophylactically may be of benefit during stressful times.

**Foraging ability:** Fair. Best suited to small areas or confinement.

**Harvest age (M/F):** 20 weeks

**Harvest weight (M/F):** live weight 5 to 6 lbs. for cockerels, 3-4 lbs. for hens

**Carcass yield (M/F):** 70-72%

**Nutritional values:**
A study conducted by Mother Earth News has found eggs from pastured raised hens have higher values for a number of nutrients than USDA data for eggs from hens in confinement houses. Pastured eggs contain:
   - 50% more Vitamin E
   - 4 times the Beta Carotene
   - 35 times the Omega-3 fatty acids
   - Half the Cholesterol
   And they contain 10.5 mcg of Folic Acid
   (That is 10.5 mcg more than USDA’s data for eggs.)

A study funded by the USDA shows meat from chickens raised on pasture contained:
   - 21% less total fat
   - 30% less saturated fat
   - 28% fewer calories
   - 50% more Vitamin A
   - 100% more Omega-3 fatty acids

A Study conducted by James Madison University found bacterial contamination to be lower in pastured poultry:
   - 133 colony-forming units per milliliter (cfu/ml) in pastured poultry
   - 3600 cfu/ml in conventional poultry

A Virginia Tech study found pastured poultry to be 70% lower in fat, and of the fats present, poly-unsaturated were much higher than mono-saturated.

And a study by Pennsylvania State University found 3 times the Omega-3s, twice the Vitamin E, and 40% more vitamin A in the eggs of chickens on pastured compared to conventional confinement.


### Marketing

**Products:** meat, eggs, fertilizer, fly tying feathers

**Services:** soil improvement, pest control

**Markets (current & historic):** A solid producer of tender flesh and a moderate producer of white eggs. A good choice for producing specialty meat if attention is paid to fattening during the last month of growth prior to harvest

### Contacts

American Poultry Association, 5757 West Fork Road, Cincinnati, OH, 45247, (513) 598-4337, [secretaryapa@yahoo.com](mailto:secretaryapa@yahoo.com), [www.amerpoultryassn.com](http://www.amerpoultryassn.com)
Conservatoire des poules de Crèvecœur du Pays d'Auge (France)
https://www.facebook.com/poulesdecrevecoeur/

Crèvecœur Chicken Conservation Project (U.S.)
www.facebook.com/CrevecoeurConservation

North American Crèvecœur Breeders
https://www.facebook.com/groups/519449748558495/

Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities, Dr. Charles R.H. Everett, secretary, 122 Magnolia Lane, Lugoff, SC, 29078, email crheverett@bellsouth.net

Resources

American Pastured Poultry Producers Association – www.apppa.org/

Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) – National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultry/

Breeds of Livestock – Oklahoma State University, Department of Animal Science www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/


Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) – www.sare.org/

Case Studies


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*Updated 02/19*