

CHANGES IN THE CONSERVATION PRIORITY LIST FOR 2024



“It’s all about the CPL,” says Alison Martin, program director for The Livestock Conservancy. “Everything we do is based upon the Conservation Priority List.”

That’s why the annual release of the CPL is such a big deal for heritage breed conservation and it’s why hours and hours go into preparing the List. The Livestock Conservancy determines livestock conservation priorities based upon each breed’s annual number of registrations in the United States and its estimated global population, and poultry priorities are established by census every five years. The resulting CPL rankings help the organization target conservation efforts for more than 180 endangered livestock and poultry breeds. It also helps farmers, ranchers, shepherds, homesteaders and backyard enthusiasts across America answer the most common question asked of staff, “Which breed should I raise?”

Things are looking good for heritage breeds in 2024. Nearly all the changes on this year’s CPL are heading in a positive direction.

Meishan Pigs

Thanks to the hard work of an active breed association and dedicated breeders, Meishan pig conservation is a success story this year. The registry recorded the 1000th pig since its formation and registered a record 348 pigs in 2023. As a result, Meishan pigs move from Critical to Threatened. The consumer market for Meishan pork is growing rapidly and supports healthy growth of the breed’s population.

These small but prolific pigs are a super fit for small-scale pork production. First imported to America from China in 1989 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the University of Illinois and Iowa State University for research on their large litter sizes, Meishan pigs were largely unknown to the public for the next two decades.

In 2013, Livestock Conservancy member Rico Silvera began to take an interest in these docile, fast-growing pigs. Silvera secured genetics, working with The Livestock Conservancy. Meishan pigs joined the CPL in 2018 when it became clear they were disappearing

Meishan sows like Pink Lady from Laura Jensen’s Meishan Preservation characteristically have litters of 14-16 piglets.

in their native China due to African Swine Fever control measures. These regulations resulted in great population losses of China’s village pigs.

Silvera passed the torch to Conservancy member Laura Jensen and Meishan Preservation in 2020. Interest from other farmers grew as potential for marketing the succulent, marbled Meishan pork became clear. Meishan pig breeders can now be found in more than half the states in the nation, further securing the breed. (For more on Silvera’s efforts, see Page 11.)

Tamworth Pigs

Another heritage pig making a comeback is the Tamworth. Registration numbers now exceed the Watch category, prompting a promotion to the Recovering classification.

Some breeders select for a “production” type of Tamworth popular on small farms and homesteads. Others



Tamworth thrive on pasture and in the woods. In 2024, the breed has moved to Recovering on the CPL.

breed “exhibition” type hogs, and Tamworths have become popular with youth exhibitors. Although numbers are on the rise in the U.S., the same has not been true for Tamworth pigs in the United Kingdom, their country of origin. This makes the U.S. population even more important for global conservation.

Centuries of selection for efficient foraging on pastures and in forests have given bright red Tamworth pigs long heads and strong snouts. Tamworths make excellent “rototillers” on rough pastures or woodland where they clear undergrowth and turn the soil. Long, sturdy legs and sound feet give Tamworth pigs the ability to walk considerable distances. Finer-boned than many pigs, an excellent carcass yields up to 70% due to the high meat-to-bone ratio. Tamworth meat is lean, with good marbling and flavor; the bacon is succulent, fine-grained and meaty, with ribbons of fat.

These hardy pigs are adaptable to a variety of climates. They remain an active breed and do not care to be confined in small areas. They do well in pastures, woodlots and low-input systems where hardiness and reproductive efficiency are desired. Tamworths are sociable and easy to handle. The breed is suitable for beginners and makes an excellent family pig.

Spanish Goats

Spanish goats improve from Threatened to Recovering, a success story for one of several regional American breeds on the CPL. Spanish goats have achieved a secure spot in profitable animal production. The breed is documented as a logical “best choice” for goat meat production through research done by Livestock Conservancy Board Member Dr. Richard Browning of Tennessee State University and others.

Expanding numbers of Spanish goats, especially bloodlines from the Texas Hill Country, make the breed increasingly secure. Large herds in that region have undergone decades of selection for fertility, growth rate and the ability to thrive on range forages. They are a strong reminder that localized herds and flocks, when given careful stewardship, can play an important role in securing a heritage breed.

Other portions of the Spanish goat breed include herds from the Rio Grande Valley and Brush Goats from the Southeast (including the Baylis bloodline and others). The extinction threat for these sub-populations is more precarious than the Texas Hill Country goats. Hopefully, these herds continue to benefit from targeted conservation and selection programs, assuring all bloodlines share in the breed’s success.

Rabbit Populations Multiplying

Dedicated breeders throughout America have been working to improve the conservation status of heritage rabbits on the CPL. Many breeders enjoy exhibiting their rabbits, while others raise rabbits primarily for meat and fur.

Rabbit exhibition counts are an important metric used in The Livestock



Crème D’Argent rabbits improved from Threatened to Watch on the CPL.



Giant Chinchilla rabbits fell from Watch into the Threatened category.

Conservancy’s census estimates to evaluate breed populations. Although it took a few years for show numbers to bounce back from the COVID shutdown of 2020, last year’s show and registration numbers from the American Rabbit Breeders Association helped place several rabbit breeds into new categories on the CPL. With these changes, there will be NO rabbits in the Critical category in 2024!

Argente Brun, Checkered Giant and Crème D’Argent improve from Threatened to the Watch category. Joining them in Watch are **Beveren** rabbits, a fine choice for homestead meat production, which drops down from Recovering status last year. **Blanc de Hotot** and **Silver** rabbit numbers are climbing, moving these two breeds from Critical to Threatened. Silver rabbits date back at least 500 years and may have been developed even earlier. They come in three colors and are known for the silver-white hairs and hair-tips distributed evenly throughout their short coats.

Rhinelander and **Silver Marten** rabbits have also gained in popularity and will move into Recovering. Rhinelanders have distinctive “calico” markings, large litters and a laid back personality. Silver Martens are making perhaps the biggest “jump” on the CPL, improving from Critical to the last category before graduation off the List. Consider adding this affectionate and docile breed to your home or farm and continue the momentum for this beautiful breed.

American and **Giant Chinchilla** rabbits need more breeders and exhibitors. Both breeds drop from Watch

into the Threatened category. American rabbits come in blue and white varieties. With their large size they are an excellent choice for meat rabbits. The Giant Chinchilla features the same distinctive Chinchilla-like fur of the Standard Chinchilla and American Chinchilla rabbit breeds. Developer Edward Stahl named his ideal doe the "Million Dollar Princess." Stahl was the first person to make a million dollars in rabbit breeding, and the breed came to be known as the Million Dollar Rabbit. Giant Chinchillas are fast growing and can produce a seven-pound fryer in two months.

Graduations

Endangered heritage breeds graduate from the CPL and are no longer in need of continuous monitoring if annual registrations exceed 5,000 or global numbers exceed 25,000. This success puts these breeds on par with other graduated livestock breeds like Percheron horses (2013) and Wyandotte chickens (2016). The Livestock Conservancy continues to observe these populations, but without the continuous monitoring devoted to CPL breeds.

Having a breed hit this benchmark is always an occasion for celebration because it means the dedication and hard work of breeders have paid off. We are pleased to announce two heritage breed graduations in 2024!

The **Hereford hog** (also pictured on the cover of this *Newsletter*) is prized for its eye-catching color, a deep red, with white trim, as well as its quiet, docile behavior. Beneath the surface of its attractive appearance and temperament lie all the characteristics that make the Hereford hog an increasingly popular



Gentle, attractive Hereford pigs are graduating off the CPL in 2024.



Southdown sheep are graduating off the CPL in 2024.

choice for small-scale production systems and youth projects.

An American breed, the Hereford hog was developed in the Midwest in the early 20th century, resembling Hereford cattle in color and marking. Following a shift away from using purebred hogs in commercial production, the Hereford became quite rare. Only 382 hogs were registered by the American Hereford Hog Record Association in 1982. Today, breeders and enthusiasts have restored the Hereford hog to secure numbers, with well over 5,000 registrations per year.

Herefords are excellent foragers, gaining weight quickly on grass without high grain inputs. They grow faster than most heritage hogs, reaching 200-250 pounds by their sixth month. They also produce high-quality, tasty pork. While this is a breed ideally suited for small family farms, the Hereford hog is adaptable enough to do well in confinement systems, too. Herefords are also a great choice for 4-H or FFA projects, bringing attractive conformation, gentle manners and striking appearance to the show ring.

As with every heritage breed, preserving the traditional functionality of the Hereford hog as a hardy, gentle, good-growing pasture pig remains important. Breeders can further secure the future of production-type Hereford hogs by collaborating with The Livestock Conservancy to cryopreserve tissue samples

with the USDA's National Animal Germplasm Program; email staff member Charlene Couch (page 2) for details. Even as a CPL graduate, these samples are an important long-term safety net, especially with the threat of African Swine Fever.

The conformation, temperament and adaptability of the Hereford hog and its growing appreciation by the public make it a 2024 conservation success story. Congratulations!

Southdown sheep also graduate from the CPL in 2024. As a Downs breed originating in England, they fill dual-purpose roles, providing both delicious lamb and mutton, as well as distinctive wool.

Southdown wool is an excellent choice for socks and mittens as it resists felting, when individual yarn fibers shrink, fuse together and thicken to form a single piece of cloth. The wool can be spun for lofty, warm sweaters and strong, long-lasting blankets. Southdown is one of the few wools from breeds on the CPL that is both machine washable and machine dryable.

Southdown sheep are an excellent choice for homesteads and small farm flocks. They are early maturing and prolific with a lambing rate of about 150 percent, meaning shepherds can typically anticipate a total of three lambs from two pregnancies. They adapt well to a variety of climates including wet regions. Naturally polled with calm and affectionate dispositions, Southdowns are also a popular breed for youth exhibition. This has significantly

contributed to the more than 5,000 annual registrations.

In the U.S., the conformation of “production” type sheep and “exhibition” type sheep is often different, as is their diet. Shepherds who buy sheep from farms and ranches having similar goals and husbandry practices to their own will have the best early success with Southdown sheep. The same holds true if you’re emphasizing wool production as a priority for your flock; purchase stock from a shepherd with a history of emphasizing wool quality.

The popularity of Southdowns has held steady over the last twenty years. The breed is now the sixth or seventh most popular sheep breed in the U.S. accounting for about 80% of the global population of Southdowns. Significant numbers of Southdowns are also found in England, Australia and France.

While “Old English” or “Babydoll” Southdown sheep are also very popular, they are only distantly related to the full-size Southdown heritage breed. Confusion between these breeds hasn’t held back the popularity of purebred Southdown sheep. Shepherds encourage buyer awareness and educate new breed enthusiasts to purchase only registered stock or wool from registered stock.

The graduation of Southdown sheep off the CPL is a perfect example of the impact of The Livestock Conservancy’s Shave ‘Em to Save ‘Em program. Launched five years ago, this fiber initiative pairs hundreds of heritage breed shepherds like Caroline Crouch of Whitney Hill Farm in New Hampton, New Hampshire with thousands of fiber artists throughout America. These wool purchases directly support heritage

sheep conservation and they are making a difference in saving breeds facing extinction. Southdowns are only the second sheep breed to graduate off the CPL and our first sheep breed to graduate in more than 10 years. Katahdin sheep, a hair breed that doesn’t require shearing, graduated in 2013.

Congratulations to the more than 350 breeders of Southdown sheep in the U.S. on this conservation success. We salute the first wool breed of sheep to graduate from the CPL and sincerely thank enrolled Shave ‘Em to Save ‘Em fiber artists for playing a part in this important accomplishment.

On the Road to Graduation

A few CPL breeds hover on the point of graduation. These merit recognition because increased publicity, greater demand and more breed stewards may well nudge them off the CPL in the next few years.

Silver Fox rabbits, Red Devon cattle, and Myotonic (Tennessee Fainting) goats are well on the path towards secure populations. Each of these heritage breeds is approaching the graduation threshold and for different reasons. They provide strong examples of factors that can help breeds graduate including breeder collaboration, jobs on the farm and breed promotion.

The **Silver Fox** rabbit breed is doing exceptionally well. The population is



Red Devon Cattle (CPL Status: Recovering) perform well on grass.

booming from a surge in interest in the breed for both show and meat production. A 2023 census found a breeding population of over 3,200 rabbits, and more than 700 Silver Fox rabbits have been shown in the past five years. (Learn more about the census on Page 24.) Silver Fox rabbits are an American breed, found nowhere else in the world. Breeders have emphasized selection for growth and body weight, as well as dense fur that characterizes the Silver Fox. Breed stewards are eager to introduce this fine rabbit to more homesteaders, farmers, youth and exhibitors. The Livestock Conservancy recognizes their teamwork and encourages new stewards to consider Silver Fox rabbits in 2024.

Red Devon cattle are an example of successful global heritage breed conservation. Significant populations exist in the U.K. (where they originated), Australia, Brazil and the United States. Each country has a population of roughly



CPL breeds: American Buff goslings (Watch), Cayuga ducks (Watch) and a Sumatra cockerel (Threatened).

2,500–5,000 registered breeding animals, with smaller populations found in a handful of other countries. The global population of Red Devon cattle is now estimated to be 22,000–23,000, making the global threshold of 25,000 needed for graduation an achievable goal in coming years.

Good collaboration exists among breeders in different countries. Nothing highlights this healthy teamwork more clearly than this year's World Devon Congress, which will take place in the U.S. Held every four years since 1980, the World Devon Congress brings together breeders from all over the world to exchange information and visit premier Devon operations in the host country. This year's tour will reach hundreds of farmers and ranchers from Florida to Maine culminating at Plimoth Patuxet Museums with the reenactment of the first animals' arrival at the Plymouth colony. Festivities stretch from April 20 through May 2; additional details can be found at www.reddevonusa.com/World_Congress.

Publicity for this event will attract even more interest in the breed. Could they graduate from the CPL in time for the 2028 World Devon Congress? Plan a visit to a tour stop or the Museums and see if Red Devon cattle might be a fit for your farm, ranch or homestead. Collaboration among Devon cattle breeders extends to **American Milking Devons**. This sister breed now exists only in the U.S and remains at the Critical level on the CPL. The breed is extinct in the U.K., its country of origin. American Milking Devon breeders have participated in planning for the 2024 Congress and Milking Devon cattle breeders will participate



Myotonic (or Tennessee Fainting) goats move to Recovering on the CPL.

in the final celebration of Congress festivities on May 2. The American Milking Devon Cattle Association hopes to attract more breeders in the next few years, because annual registrations are right on the threshold for moving from Critical to Threatened. If you're looking for a tri-purpose cattle breed to provide milk, oxen power and meat, consider this beautiful breed with one of the longest pedigrees in America – 400 years and counting.

Myotonic goats are also known as Tennessee Fainting goats. With more than 4,200 kids registered per year, this heritage breed is well on its way to graduation off the CPL. This sturdy landrace meat goat is characterized by myotonia, a genetic trait that causes their muscles to stiffen when the goats are startled. Myotonia stimulates muscle development, so Myotonic goats have a higher meat to bone ratio than other breeds of meat goats, even though their growth rate is somewhat slower.

Myotonic goats come in a variety of colors, adding interest and beauty to grazing flocks. They also have a reputation for being easier to manage than other meat goat breeds. Multiple registries serve this breed, and reputable breeders emphasize the importance of registering breeding animals.

If you're interested in adding Silver Fox rabbits, Red Devon cattle, or Myotonic goats to your livestock, start with The Livestock Conservancy's online or printed *Directory: Rare Breeds and Products Resource Guide* to locate breeding stock. If you raise these breeds already, keeping your animal information up to date helps potential buyers find your livestock and poultry quickly and easily.

The key for breeds approaching graduation is to "expand the habitat." Just as conservation of endangered species such as native plants, birds and apex predators depends on conserving and expanding the habitats where they thrive, the same is true for the conservation of rare farm animal breeds.

The habitat for livestock and poultry can be a farm, ranch, homestead or backyard. People keeping more animals in more places expands the habitat for an endangered breed. It also spreads the genetics out geographically so breed populations have a larger safety net in the case of disease challenges and natural disasters. These steps enable breed populations to grow and genetic diversity to improve. As a result, heritage breeds become less endangered so they no longer need continuous monitoring and can graduate from the CPL. What can you do to promote or raise a Recovering breed and help them graduate from the CPL?

Every animal needs a job, whether for sport, fiber, companionship, meat, milk, work or even conservation grazing. Giving heritage breeds a purpose, mentoring new breeders, managing populations and promoting the unique strengths of CPL livestock and poultry are the keys to successful conservation efforts for rare and endangered livestock. Active, engaged breeders and breed associations are The Livestock Conservancy's most important partners in this mission. We salute their work and celebrate the successes found in the 2024 Conservation Priority List. ■



CPL breeds: American Mammoth Jackstock donkey (Critical); Narragansett turkey (Watch).