

CHANGES TO THE 2025 CONSERVATION PRIORITY LIST

Each year, The Livestock Conservancy updates the Conservation Priority List (CPL), an annual evaluation of endangered agricultural breeds. The list classifies breeds into increasingly serious classifications: Recovering, Watch, Threatened and Critical.

Census numbers for livestock breeds are gathered from breed associations throughout the year, along with their reports of trends, issues and triumphs. Some landrace breeds don't have formal registries; for those, feedback from a network of relationships with breeders helps carefully craft estimates of breeding populations. Global population estimates are important for "transboundary breeds" – those found in more than one country. Sources of information for global population estimates include international conservation organizations, breed associations, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and university scientists overseas who know the status of certain breeds and breeders in their country.

The information collected provides a rich context for the annual review of each breed on the CPL. Using information provided by breed associations, breeders and other conservation partners and our established criteria (see page 14A; also online at <https://livestockconservancy.org/heritage-breeds/parameters-conservation-priority-list/>) the status of each breed is carefully reviewed and appropriate changes are made to the Conservation Priority List.

Barbados Blackbelly Sheep

In 2025, Barbados Blackbelly move from Watch to Threatened. Barbados Blackbelly sheep are a landrace hair sheep breed originating in the 1700s, early in the colonization of Barbados. The breed is heat tolerant with a high degree of parasite tolerance. They are excellent foragers that can breed year-round and frequently deliver multiple lambs. These qualities make them well adapted for semi-tropical areas like the Caribbean and more temperate climates in the U.S. and Canada. The meat is mild, and their relatively small body size is ideal for smaller resource-limited farms.

Courtesy Will Hueston



A Barbados Blackbelly Sheep photobombs Livestock Conservancy member Will Hueston of Free Union, Virginia. The breed has moved to the Threatened classification for 2025.

Few Barbados Blackbelly sheep have been imported into the U.S., the most recent in the 1970s. Many of these naturally polled sheep were crossbred with horned breeds to establish the American Blackbelly, a non-CPL breed. In 2004, the remaining uncrossed (purebred) Barbados Blackbelly sheep were identified through pedigree research by the Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International, and these are the ancestors of all registered Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the U.S. today.

Sheep numbers have declined in Barbados due to social and economic factors such as the lack of recruitment of new farmers as older farmers retire, the decreasing availability and rising value of agricultural land and increasing feed costs. The coronavirus pandemic led to even more flock dispersals.

Natural disasters also play a role in diminishing populations and represent an existential threat to the nation's sheep population. Eruptions from the

La Soufriere volcano in St. Vincent in 2021 blanketed pastures in thick ash, leaving livestock unable to find suitable forage. Breathing and eating volcanic ash caused further illness, as did fluorine residues from the ash in water. Just last year, Hurricane Beryl narrowly missed Barbados. Barbados is a tiny island, just 21 miles long and 14 miles wide. A direct hit from a Category 5 hurricane like Beryl would have decimated many of the remaining Barbados Blackbelly flocks.

While populations in the U.S. remain steady with around 1,100 animals in a recent census conducted by the BBSAI, the loss of sheep in Barbados contributed to moving Barbados Blackbelly to Threatened on the CPL.

Barbados has a government livestock research unit with Blackbelly sheep. Still, the flock size has decreased over time, and shepherds have limited capacity for maintaining extra breeding males – an essential element of maintaining genetic diversity. Barbados' decreasing sheep

population and the island's vulnerability to natural disasters make breeding flocks in the U.S. and other countries all the more important. Efforts are underway to expand international collaboration for conservation and recovery strategies in case of a natural catastrophe.

Araucana Chickens

In 2025, Araucana chickens are added to the CPL in the Critical category. The population of purebred Araucanas in the U.S. is estimated to be around 400 birds. There are only four breeding flocks of 50 birds or more, all in private hands.

Araucanas represent a portion of highly diverse landrace populations of chickens originating in Chile. The birds we know as Araucanas were first described in Chile by Professor Salvador Castello in 1914. He later introduced them to the poultry trade at the World's Poultry Congress at the Hague in 1921. In 1924, the Pratt Experiment Farm of Morton, Pennsylvania, imported some of the first Araucanas, two males and five females, to North America. More birds followed in subsequent years. American enthusiasts standardized specific breed characteristics and developed five color varieties: Black, Black Breasted Red, Golden Duckwing, Silver Duckwing and White. These five varieties were accepted into the American Poultry Association's *Standard of Perfection* in 1976.

Enthusiasts in other countries imported the landrace chickens of Chile, too. In those countries, breeders standardized different aspects of the genetic diversity represented in the original landrace, so breed standards in other countries differ in some respects from the APA breed standard. Thus, the full diversity of Araucana chickens is captured to a large degree worldwide. This is fortunate because development and crossbreeding threaten the ancestors of Araucana chickens in Latin America.

Most Araucana chickens in the U.S. are raised for exhibition and their fascinating, blue-colored eggs. They can be proficient egg layers, with good hens laying approximately 250 eggs annually. In the U.S., Araucana chickens have ear-tufts and are "rumpless," that is, they have no tail. The rumpless trait is due to the absence of tail bones and does not affect their health or productivity.

The dominant gene that causes this trait results in lethality for embryos that carry two copies. Therefore, 25% of fertile Araucana eggs will not develop to maturity.

"This is the most challenging breed (to get right) that I have personally bred," shares Araucana owner and breeder Maegan Holland of Harrodsburg, Kentucky. "Combine that with the fact that there are very few dedicated breeders out there, these factors have led to its decline and to the Araucana breed becoming critically endangered."

She says the popularity of hybrid birds that lay blue or green eggs has added to the breeding challenges, and some non-blue-egg layers were introduced into the gene pool, which has further complicated conservation of the breed. "Since ear tufts, rumplessness and blue eggs are all three dominant genes, it can be difficult to know if the breeding stock you are getting really is purebred Araucana or a mixed breed that looks like an Araucana," she adds.

Holland continues, "This is not a breed for a beginner. Nevertheless, this was my first breed, and I fell in love with them. It was the most unique chicken I had ever seen, and when I found out

how rare they were and that they are rarely exhibited at shows, I wanted to get involved and change that. This breed takes dedication but is worth saving. They have the best personality of any breed I've handled, are excellent layers, and provide a nice, meaty carcass. They do great in the summer and winter with their medium fluff and pea combs. I think they are the entire package!"

The Livestock Conservancy conducts its poultry census approximately every five years and is preparing for the next census in 2026. Breed clubs are especially important partners in raising awareness among their breeders to capture the full scope of a breed population. Because of their large breeding flocks, hatcheries are also important for the census, and The Livestock Conservancy makes every attempt to capture all segments of poultry breeds. If you would like to learn more about the 2026 poultry census or to conduct a detailed census of a breed, please email info@livestockconservancy.org. ■

Will Hueston and Maegan Holland contributed to this article.

Courtesy Maegan Holland



Turner Holland is joined by an Araucana chicken on his family's farm near Harrodsburg, Kentucky. The Araucana is new to the Conservation Priority List in 2025.