

YOU DO KEEP A “BOOK”, DON’T YOU?

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If you hatched in April and May like I did, you have a lot of little ones running around now and they are eating quite a bit. Hopefully you have gone through them weekly and gotten rid of those that are not up to your standards. At least for Bantams, there are several items I look for as the young birds are growing. I thought I would share a few of them, especially for the new breeders and members. Cochins take quite a while to mature, so knowing what to cull for in the developing months will help you keep only what are going to be the most promising individuals.

First, I always check feet and toes. There are allowances in the standard for feather legged breeds when it comes to short toes, etc., but I have made it a policy to cull those that do not have four fully formed toes. Others do not do this, but that is something that I have completely bred out of my birds now. I look for it, but I do not have this genetic issue anymore. I did have one bird this year that had two toes attached with too tight of webbing between the toes. I used a sharp pair of scissors and separated the toes. The foot spread out like it should and the bird is fine. Don’t cull for foot color or maybe not even for feathering all the way down the middle toe at this point. You will get to know your lines and whether the birds will feather down the toe later, but if you are new to it don’t cull too early for the foot feathering. If the chick does not have the feathering down the middle toe at all by the fourth month, I would say they won’t get it. Exercise discretion here.

Next, I turn to combs. I like neat combs that are not overly done. I like combs that are not coarse, and I absolutely hate a large lobe in the back growing down the back of the head. So early on I check for side sprigs. On single combed breeds, this is generally a protuberance off the side of the comb that is like an extra point. It usually is in the back. Do not keep any birds with this. It is a disqualification in the show hall and should be in your breeding pens. Remember, what you allow in the breeding pen will show up in the show hall. Watch for wrinkles or twists in the comb, especially in the males. I had a wrinkle in the lobes of males for several generations. After fixing some of the issues, I decided to make this a priority. I culled males with this problem and rarely do I see this now. I culled some good birds otherwise, but this trait bothers me when I see it so I made sure I didn’t see it anymore. The number of points on the comb and their spacing is another issue to consider. I honestly pay more attention to the spacing of the points than I do the number. I will keep birds with four or five points. I never keep a three point comb in the flock and more than five tends to make the head look snakey and long. Sometimes you have to wait until they are about 5 months old to fully appreciate the symmetry of the comb, or lack thereof. It takes a while for it to redden up and be on scale with the rest of the head.

If you don’t have a nice, high forehead and a circular, round head then don’t keep the bird. Crow headed Cochins look like that from the get-go so don’t tolerate it.

Now for the wattles. Sometimes one wattle will be larger than the other or the bottom will not be nice, full and rounded. This is a pretty particular trait to cull for and I would not consider it if I was just trying to improve a rare Variety, but with Varieties that are highly developed and competitive in the show halls, this trait is one of the fine tuning aspects we should consider.

Don't cull for eye color too early. Rarely will developing chicks have properly colored eyes. So give them time. Different Varieties mature at different rates. Pay particular attention to the age at which your better specimens begin to develop eye color and write it in your book. (You do keep a "book", don't you?) That will help you hold successive generations to the same standard.

Beak color can be culled for now, and you should check the standard to see what is allowable for your Variety.

As birds grow, you should see their cushions beginning to take form and their back ends often overpower their front ends. It's that way with people, too!! Birds that have remained narrow in the fifth month probably are not going to develop a great cushion.

I never like to keep birds that mature slowly. I don't have much hope in a bird that matures quickly either. Birds that lack thriftiness and seem to stand around and do nothing will end up as nothing, in my opinion. Also, a young cockerel that seems to be the cock-of-the-walk with a large comb and wattles will often slow down and end up with everyone else when they finish out, or he will have every other bird pass him up when the growing is done. Kind of like that kid in Jr. High gym class that was bigger than everyone else, but was only average height upon graduation.

Watch wing growth at this stage. There will be molting of the narrow pointed juvenile feathers and the growth of wider, shorter, rounded adult feathers. Check for the appropriate color for your Variety. With the Mottled, I never keep a cockerel with a white primary. As two year old males, I will do that as I can't keep them black thru the second year. But cockerels that are too light are not good.

Check for other colors in the plumage that are foreign to the standard. This year I had some Mottled males get red in the hackle. The hackle will be one of the first places discoloration will show up in developing birds.

It is harder to **check the combs of the females,** but a magnifying glass or some such device will help you check for the quality of combs your females are carrying. What you allow on your females will end up in the males eventually. So watch for sprigs and point placement in them, too. Sometimes you have to wait a little longer for the comb to grow and swell.

My birds are about five months old, and they are changing a lot right now. For a while they go through and just seem to be at a stand-still. I think that is when they are putting on feathers. Then they seem to grow and build type. That is what mine are doing now, and I love to watch them change by the week. If you have birds together that were not all hatched at the same time, keep this in mind. Don't require of the younger ones the same thing you are culling for in the older ones.

Of course, you must keep them well fed with plenty of clean water. If you have several pens or if you have mixed the sexes together, you should be sure you have plenty of places for them to eat. Sometimes the more developed ones will run the others away.

I have hatched about 100 Mottleds and most of my males are in individual cages now. Some of the younger males are still with the females on the floor. But when the males are in show cages, you can compare them with each other so much better. Then the finer points of balance, temperament (Cochins should be an easily handled, temperate breed), and feather quality can be assessed on an even playing field.

This may sound like a lot of work, but it is a labor of love for those of us who enjoy the endless quest for the perfect bird, or at least the challenge of perfecting them more and more with each generation. I hope you enjoy the show season and the time

sorting through your birds. I hope these hints have added some insight to your breeding program.

DECEMBER, 2019 EPILOGUE

I was asked to add a few updates to the article concerning when and what to cull for. I will preface this by saying that the following comments pertain to my Cochin bantams, not necessarily the whole breed. I would think there would be quite a bit of correlation, but please keep in mind that the following are suggestions. I have rarely added new lines into my bloodlines, so I have certain traits stamped into the genetics of my line. However, if you are working with a volatile line, that is one with a lot of different genetics battling it out, your experiences might not match those described below.

One of the traits often asked about is **vulture hocks**. It seems many breeders are noticing those hock feathers that begin growing before a lot of the other body feathers. Because they get long and lack fluffiness at first, some think they are vulture hocks. My advice would be not to cull for vulture hocks until the bird has all of its body feathers grown in and has that classic round shape of a Cochin. Very few Cochins have vulture hocks, save some of the rare varieties. I do not even look for culture hocks, and I am very picky. That is not to say that you shouldn't, just don't jump in and cull youngsters that might end up as good birds.

I hesitate to include time frames, but it was requested that I do so to make some of the original suggestions clearer. Keep in mind that not all birds mature similarly. Not everyone feeds their birds the same feeds. Housing conditions and husbandry have a huge effect on the growth and development of animals. These time frames are applicable to my lines only. We will start with foot color. Foot color means the color of the pads on the underside of the foot and usually on up the shank. White Cochins can have a greenish-willow pad color which is a definite disqualification. Partridge can have a similar color. These should be avoided. The standard suggests that the primary color be yellow. It doesn't have to be completely yellow, as the standard says a complete absence of yellow in all varieties is a disqualification. I see pictures of birds' feet posted to show their compete yellow pigmentation. That is all fine and dandy, but if I had a bird that was knock-out in other areas, I would certainly not cull it because it has some black in the color of the pads. Don't go overboard on this. There are some genetic correlations with other traits, and I won't get into that here, but I would give a youngster 5-6 months at least to exhibit foot color within the permissible limits of the standard.

When the young birds are fully feathered and exhibiting roundness, one can begin assessing **head structure and beak color**. This could be in the 6-8 months of age time frame. Pertaining to head structure, the bird should begin developing a nice, round skull with a pronounced brow. A bird that has a narrow, snakey head with little rise of the skull where the skull meets the nostrils is not fit to keep. Often the beak is long and placed higher on the skull than need be. Nothing, and I repeat, nothing ruins the appearance of a Cochin Bantam more than a narrow crow-shaped head. If you have high hopes you can give the bird a while to mature, but my experience says it probably won't improve. Beak color has also developed by the 6-month point, in my opinion. Most Cochins have yellow or swarthy yellow beak colors. A few exhibit horn or reddish horn. Beak color seems minor and there are lots of variable shades, but try to keep the beak the correct color, within limits. I know if I allow for a yellow beak in my mottleds, there are going to be a heap of other problems that go along with that. Traits

don't come along in isolation. Allowing one little variation will often bring with it more variations that might not be so small in the next generation.

The last trait I will discuss is **wing development**. I think this has to be given the most time to present itself. My birds take a very long time to show complete wing development. I am sure others' birds develop faster. I allow a year to see the whole wing and a nice flat presentation when the wing is opened wide. I think this is the most difficult issue facing Cochin bantams of all varieties. Weak wings are extremely hereditary, so give the issue the attention it requires.

So, as you can see, it can take up to a year to fully assess a Cochin Bantam. It takes longer than that for large fowl. Perhaps a large fowl breeder can give some advice in a future article. Plan accordingly, don't hatch more than you can comfortably house, and prepare to feed them awhile. They are slow growers, but the results are worth the wait!

