

JUDGING EARLY COCHIN CHARACTERISTICS

By Bryant Helvey (September, 2020)

As summer closes and fall begins, I most enjoy scrutinizing a group of young birds, finding the birds with faults, and picking out the birds that may grow into something special. The selection process is very enjoyable for me, and looking over a group of young birds after removing the lower-quality individuals I have been questioning is very rewarding. The club mission is to promote the development of the cochin breed; accordingly, if we choose to multiply our birds, we must be willing to promote birds that will improve the breed and eliminate others from the breeding flock.

I see many breeders, especially new breeders with great intentions, looking for guidance on how early one can cull birds from the flock. Due to their fullness of body and feather, large and bantam cochins continue to develop until a year of age, and the longer a breeder can wait to decide which to keep and which to cull, the better. Practically, however, space and money dictate for many of us that lower quality birds be dropped when their faults are permanent. Well planned, this also allows us to hatch more birds, which as a result can quicken the pace of improvement. In the interest of this improvement, here is a timeline of characteristics that can be judged “early” as cochins mature:

Shortly after hatching:

General health, straight toes, leg color- these things rarely, if ever, improve with age

Several months of age:

General health, straight toes (sometimes birds do develop crooked toes over time), side sprigs on combs, in some cases, plumage color. Note! Plumage color changes A LOT with age, but there are consistent progressions. Birds can be culled for red or silver lacing in the hackle or shoulders of varieties where this is a fault, but don't confuse this for white tipping which usually disappears with age. Patterned varieties can show color faults early. I recommend that a learning breeder not cull early for color until the breeder has several years of notes and observations under his/her belt; this experience will educate earlier decisions each year.

Four to six months of age:

At this age I begin to feel confident about eliminating birds for wing confirmation, one of the most widely seen faults in the cochin breed. Before judging a bird on wing confirmation, all of the narrow/pointed “chick wing” feathers must be molted out and replaced with the rounded, wide adult primaries and secondaries. These larger feathers should all be allowed to grow to a consistent length across the wing; this precise age will vary across strains and even across sexes from a single breeding.

In addition to these guidelines, here are some universal ideas to keep in mind when culling your flock:

1. If in doubt, notate and observe further while the bird matures. This not only prevents you from making a hasty mistake, but greatly informs future decisions.
2. Be aware of the size of your “pool” of potential birds. At the end of the year, you need to have enough birds to produce and improve the next generation; some faults may need to be tolerated for future improvement in order to meet this goal. This is especially important in rare varieties or if you are following a closed mating program.
3. Comparison is an outstanding tool. If in doubt about a particular bird, compare the characteristic to other birds of similar age, or wait until there are more birds at the same level of maturity. This will greatly assist decision making, especially as you get down to the final birds.
4. Ask a mentor. Judging the quality of birds is something that is developed over many years; culling a bird is usually permanent. Getting an educated second opinion can be great for the development of both your flock and your future judgement.

I would like to close by addressing one of the most difficult aspects of our hobby- what happens to a bird that is “culled”? This varies widely, but as someone who is intentionally bringing an animal into this world, we owe it a high-quality life and a humane ending whenever we can control this. To this end, I encourage people to be open-minded; what we see as a “waste product” can hold value with others. Many pullets can be sold to live to backyard poultry keepers who want a diverse and attractive flock. Some people are eager to utilize birds of any size or shape for food; this is a very high cause indeed and should be welcomed. I have found a demand for my excess birds with wildlife rehabilitators and falconers; they are openly grateful for donations of humanely killed, frozen birds of any size. Most importantly, understand these markets and your abilities to dispose of birds responsibly before hatching; the breed will not benefit from careless distribution of low-quality birds.

Enjoy and improve those cochins!