

# Best *Cochin*

**C**uckoo Cochins are making something of a splash in the Fancy at present, with a male taking the award for Best Cochin at the National and Welsh National for Tom Buck, and a female taking the same honours for Richard Bett at the Federation Show. We caught up with both breeders...

## Tom...

**Tom, congrats on the recent wins. How long have you kept Cuckoo Cochins and where did you get your stock?**

Thanks! I've had Cochins on and off for around 6 years. My father has kept Buff Cochins for 25 years now. The Cuckoos came 4 years ago. I purchased a Cuckoo male and a Black female out of Salisbury auction for £22. The first year I bred 11 and just carried the line on from there.

**What are they like to breed, and do you breed them to other colours such as Blacks for vigour?**

Laying and egg quality is always a problem, they tend to be quite a lazy breed when it comes to production. I hope to have the first chicks out by the end of February, but it doesn't always go to plan. As mentioned, my first Cuckoos were produced out of a Cuckoo male and a Black female. I Believe it helps with vigour and is also a good outcross.

**How many do you aim to hatch per year?**

I go for about 30. I believe in quality not quantity.

**What's fertility like and is it a challenge to produce birds of the correct size and bone?**

Fertility is normally ok, it's getting the eggs which is the problem. Getting the size into them can sometimes be an issue, and feeding a high-protein ration seems to work well; also rearing them in smaller groups. I like to grow them slow then push them



■ Tom Buck's National and Welsh National Best Cochin. Photo by Rupert & Blanche

harder come August time to get them up to size and weight ready for the big shows.

**Have you seen an upsurge in interest since your National win?**

Surprisingly, no! A lot of people seem to forget about the Cochins. I've a few breeding males ordered for this coming year (stock males and show males). Most of the surplus just end up as pet birds for people's back

gardens etc.

**Is there anything you'd like to improve on them?**

I'm always looking to improve my stock, but with limited breeders in the Cochins it's hard. I always want them bigger, but how big do they need to be? I think a better utility value (egg) being brought into the Cochins would be a great benefit.

## Richard...

**Richard, congratulations on wining best Cochin at the Fed with a Cuckoo female. How long have you kept this variety and how many do you breed?**

Thanks for that mate. I've kept Cuckoo Cochins for about ten years and my original birds came from Jack Killeen, who helped me a lot in my early years and gave me loads of encouragement. I also had birds from Gill Abraham around the same time. I

The big birds take a lot of preparation. Show prep tends to start about 3 months before the show - assessing feathers, increasing their general conditioning etc. The more time you can put into them, the better the results. I can't give a number of hours but it's every spare minute for at least two weeks before the show, early mornings and especially late nights. If I've entered one bird in a class I'll wash at least three, so I can have the pick which means in a team of a 100 birds at least 300 will be washed and dried.

**It's good to see some Cochins with the size back. Is there a renewed enthusiasm for the breed or is it the Cuckoos in particular that are enjoying a bit of a resurgence?**

Size I think is everything in large fowl; the bigger the better for me. A very well known man, who is sadly no longer with us, once told me 'a good big 'un will always beat a good little 'un.'

I am delighted and do think that Cochins are on the increase. This is due to some good breeders and the Club is very friendly with enthusiastic members; most of whom want to promote the breed.

I think all colours have improved over the last few years and the results are increased show entries and wins for lots of the members.

**Presumably the earlier hatched the better. Has it been difficult this year to get fertile hatching eggs?**

Yes, earlier the better but even late hatched chicks do well if you look after them. I try to hatch around



■ Richard Bett's Best Cochin at the Federation Show. Photo by Joshua Kittle

want to breed as many as I can, so I set every egg possible because the fertility is usually very poor with them being so big. They have too much feather and it makes it very difficult. Overall I aim for 40-50 per year.

**No doubt the winner will have taken some show prep, alongside all the other large fowl you enter at the big shows. How much time do you spend on show prep?**

January and February but it's all weather-dependent; if it's cold the cockerels don't work. This year I managed to get some early chicks in January as I put my breeding pens together earlier and was delighted to get about 150 hatch; so I've had a good start.

**Do you breed yours with your Blacks or is Cuckoo to Cuckoo best?**

I use both, but I prefer Cuckoo to Cuckoo as I think you get a better colour. You do need to use a Black in the Cuckoos occasionally, to keep the markings, although I find that my best results always come from Cuckoo to Cuckoo. Leg colour is also better from a Cuckoo pen rather than a Black pen. That said, I find that the Blacks generally have more size to them so it's a combination of both.

**What is the main challenge with breeding Cuckoo Cochins, and will you have any stock available later in the year?**

The main challenge is always to improve the quality, year on year. I'm always wanting to keep the size in them as they should be a big bird, but am also wanting to improve the colour, which is the greatest challenge. It's not always easy and sometimes not possible, but that's my aim.

I'm always keen to help people out with birds and offer advice to anyone; established breeders needing new blood or newcomers to the Fancy. At the main shows I also always put in a large range of selling birds that are bred the same way as my winners. This is twofold for me: it provides the opportunity for people to buy my birds and use the blood, and it also gives me some money to subsidise my entry fees and costs of exhibiting. I also am happy to take orders for stock at the end of the season, and I think a lot of people know that I do sell some of my winning birds out of the show pens after a show (if I think I have some better at home that are still coming through).