

Cooing for the Chantecler: a Canadian original

Poultry club gets support for saving chicken

BY AMY GEDDES

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The Chantecler, Canada's first chicken breed, was thought to have become extinct in the 1990s. But the bird persisted and is making a comeback.

Now the Salt Spring Island Poultry Club has expressed interest in uniting with hobby farmers across Canada who are working to breathe new life into the heritage breed.

"It would do well here," said Windrush Farm's Margaret Thomson, a poultry club member who is also on the Rare Breeds Canada Livestock Committee.

"It would be a suitable chicken for new poultry keepers, and we saw at the poultry club meeting that lots of new people want to start up."

Many were interested in heritage breeds of poultry, either for their personal supply of eggs and meat, or as part of their farm's business of selling to restaurants and neighbours.

Thomson gave a short talk at Wednesday's poultry club meeting that highlighted reasons why the Chantecler would do well if raised for eggs and meat on Salt Spring farms.

"It has a small comb that tends not to freeze," she explained, "and in view of our recent cold weather, it is very well suited to this climate."

The Chantecler was developed in Quebec in 1908 by Brother Wilfrid Chatelain, a Trappist monk and doctor of Agronomy,

A Chantecler Fanciers International newsletter that urges volunteers to "bring the birds back from near extinction" explains how the breed was first developed in 1908: Chatelain worked for 10 years to synthesize "the five best breeds known for their hardiness, egg laying and meat production: the Dark Cornish, White Leghorn, Wyandotte, Plymouth Rock and the Rhode



PHOTO BY GREG OAKES

Chantecler rooster on Oakesmuir Farm, Guelph, Ontario. Owner Greg Oakes has one of the biggest flocks of Chanteclers in English-speaking Canada.

elain painstakingly worked to develop the White Chantecler, a uniquely "Canadian" breed, that would withstand the cold climate and be used efficiently for both meat and egg production.

"Partridge" and "Buff" varieties were developed later by Canadians. All are now considered rare.

Thomson explained that the Chantecler would work well for hobby farmers on Salt Spring because it is a "dual-purpose bird."

"This bird lays well year-round in our climate and is still fit to eat after an egg-laying career," she said. "The males not needed for breeding would be good to eat after a few months."

A good strain will produce up to 210 eggs per bird in one year's lay. The eggs should

Rare Breeds Canada.

Bringing the bird to the island would also help reinvigorate the heritage breed.

Thomson says she does what she can to promote the raising of Canada's heritage livestock.

Currently, there are no Chanteclers being raised on Salt Spring, although Thomson notes they were raised on the island at one time.

But Chanteclers are being raised on Denman Island. Gavin Guppy of Mello Meadow Farm on Denman has been raising Chantecler chicks that he ordered from Quebec last year. Instead of selling eggs this year, he has been putting energy into breeding, and is ready to sell chicks to interested Salt Spring farmers.

ing because of commercial production," Guppy said.

"There are better egg layers and better meat producers, but they are hybrids, not pure breeds."

Hybrid varieties, he said, often suffer from

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GAVIN GUPPY

Mello Meadow Farm, Denman Island

poor health due to inbreeding and crowded living conditions.

Guppy, who also has other heritage chicken breeds, said raising rare breeds preserves the genetic diversity of the poultry gene pool.

Plus, he said he finds it just plain "interesting" to raise breeds that are unique or rare. And he says there are others like him.

"More people are getting into raising chickens in their back yards and are becoming more interested in raising heritage breeds."

When asked what he thought of Salt Spring farmers raising the Chantecler, he said, "Any group that wants to keep the breed going is a good thing."