

LE CANARD DE CHALLANS

Challans is a commune in the Vendée department in the Pays de la Loire region of western France. It boasts a duck breeding history that dates back into the middle of the seventeenth century, yet if you look up 'le canard de Challans' on the internet you will usually find conflicting information. Most French duck websites focus on the eating and cooking, as one might expect. The ducks themselves are pictured in a range of forms and colours. There are ordinary white commercial ducks, Magpie patterned ducks, Muscovy (Barbary) ducks, even 'Mulards', crosses between Muscovies and mallard-type ducks. Yet in the exhibition hall the Challans duck is a specific breed.

is not penalized apparently.

The male also resembles the Rouen Clair, but he too sports 'bavette et plastron blanc'—the same white bib as the female. Yet there were two other great surprises in store. First, the male bill had some of the pinkish-blue elements common in the Hookbill.

reinforced what we had found in the 2010 breeding pens. Last year we managed deliberately to breed Appleyard and large Butterscotch without the silver patches (illustrated in the November edition of *Fancy Fowl*, 2010). It is likely that the gene for male face markings could be at an unlinked site on the chromosomes. I suppose I should have paid more attention to John Hall's wise words when he emphasized that the original birds of Reginald Appleyard were 'green-headed'. I gather that the specimen sent to the artist, Wippell, which formed the model for Tom Barlett's re-creation of the breed, had face markings on only one side!

Just because a drake has a silver grey face and throat markings does not mean that it is necessarily a pure Appleyard. There are many specimens in British show cages that are far from pure. The French *canard de Challans* is a perfect demonstration of this. It is light phase, like the Rouen Clair, but wild-type mallard rather than restricted mallard of the Appleyard. There is obviously room here for more rigorous investigation. I suspect that the extremely pale eye stripes on the Challans duck (paler than those of the Rouen Clair) may be the result of the same gene that provides the face markings to the drake.



Andy Vereist (left) judging the Flemish geese. Andy represents the western region (including UK) in the European Standards Committee.

Show Ducks

Second, all the males sported Appleyard face markings! I had long assumed that these were part of the 'restricted mallard' plumage, the silver grey throat, cheeks and eye stripes. To most British judges and breeders this is the badge of the Appleyard male. It now seems to be independent of the other distinctive elements. This

is indeed very special. Last November in Tours there were 35 cages of *Canard de Challans* (15 males and 20 females). You only have to pick one up to feel how special it is. Whilst a traditional Rouen may seem disappointingly 'baggy' for all its apparent bulk, the Challans is solid. It has quite a long body, nothing exaggerated, but it is so broad and heavy—a real meat bird. I'm afraid I was most impressed.

To look at, the females have the basic plumage of the Rouen Clair ('teinte isabelle légèrement foncée'—pale fawn, lightly marked with degraded pencilling. The unusual thing is the white bib, like that of a Hookbill or Swedish duck. A few of the birds have the occasional white outer primary, though this



LEFT:

Challans female: showing the white bib and very light face markings. The latter may be the result of the same gene that gives eye and cheek markings to the drake in nuptial plumage. Note the typical light phase scapular and body feathers found also on the Rouen Clair. The greater wing coverts (above the speculum) show clearly the white tips of the 'trout' plumage.

BELOW:

Rouen Clair female: her face markings are more subdued than those of the Challans, but significantly lighter than the Standard Rouen.





Challans male: the eye stripes are clearly apparent. The bib has to be large and neatly delineated, but not extending on to the belly.

Tradition

Jean-Claude Périquet devotes a section of his 2004 edition of *Les oies et les canards* (Éditions Rustica, Paris) to the Challans or Nantes Duck. In the reign of Philip IV of Spain, a number of exiles settled in France, along the coastal marshes (marais) of Brittany and la Vendée, where they converted some of the gulf into dry land, something like theolders. Here began a notable duck-rearing tradition, supplying table birds to the city of Nantes as far back as the beginning of the eighteenth century. It was customary for the birds to be released from the farm yards to forage on the canals. On the banks, conical nests sites were constructed in which the ducks laid eggs fertilized either by the Challans drakes or passing mallards. The hatchlings would be reared by the duck or put underneath bantam hens. One of the big advantages of this life-style would be the abundant and rich nutrition foraged from caterpillars, tadpoles, insects, snails and bugs. On the downside, they would be more vulnerable to predation and less readily controlled than under modern 'factory' conditions. Nonetheless, after about eight weeks they would be housed for fattening. [Périquet gives more detailed information about alternative methods of rearing extracted from 1966 *Revue avicole*.]

I think it would be unwise to assume that the Challans duck has always been the same genetically; the very breeding methods militate against this. People often have a vague and romantic view of history. It is common to see breeds extolled as 'dating from ancient times.' The French Rouen has a nebulous, but believable, pedigree to the traditional ducks of the Rouen area of

Normandy. It is basically just a large, domesticated version of the wild mallard. Surprisingly, many French avicultural writers claim the Rouen Clair as the archetypal French duck, dating back to days of yore. This is surprising on two counts: first, it is generally acknowledged that the modern Rouen Clair was created by Monsieur R. Garry between 1910 and 1920; secondly, the plumage pattern (light phase) was largely available in table ducks as a result of the importation of Pekin ducks from China in the 1870s. C S Th van Gink was deeply suspicious of the Rouen Clairs exhibited in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century. He noted the similarity of shape and carriage between these 'new' Rouens and the Pekins. There remains a question mark over the birds used by Garry. He

produced first-rate specimens.

It is worth reading the 1966 edition of *Revue avicole*. Pages 59 to 68 include TWO breeds of duck resembling our *canard de Challans*! There is a very detailed section on 'Le Canard Challandais' by Patrice Bougrain-Dubourg, followed by a briefer one on 'Le

Clair, and the male has blatant Appleyard-style facial silvering, exactly like the ducks and drakes in the Tours show pens.

So we are back where we began, though I suspect that Jean-Claude Périquet was being diplomatic when he entitled his chapter 'Le canard de Challans ou canard Nantais'. It's unwise



Judging Day

admitted to using 'un canard appellat' (a cross between a Rouen and a wild-colour mallard) and he also picked up ducks from the Picardy region of northern France. By this time, Pekin-Rouen crosses had become common on many commercial duck-breeding establishments. How pure would the ducks of the Rouen Clair 'type be that' one found in the farms of Picardy? This was his avowed starting point.

By the mid 1960s *Revue avicole* was bemoaning the demise of the Rouen Clair Garry, as they called it. There were lots of birds on the farms which resembled the Rouen, but the true Rouen Clair was disappearing fast, especially in exhibitions. The *Revue* goes on to assert that 'at this moment in time this Rouen [Clair] exists most particularly in the duck-producing regions of Challans, of Nantes and la Vendée . . . where its table qualities and close resemblance to the Rouen Clair

Canard Nantais' by M. Fouque. The standards described are identical and conform to comments made earlier. Oddly, the head of the male is described in both simply as 'verte' (green), as is the upper part of the neck—no mention of silver eye stripes or cheek markings. Yet on page 67 is a 'jolie pose d'un couple de canards Challans-Nantais'. Both birds have very clear eye stripes and face markings: the duck like a bright-faced Rouen

to paddle too deeply in the mire of 'appellation contrôlée'.

Lastly, I am a bit bemused by the opening photograph in the *Review* of a Challandaise duck tethered to a metal stake in the ground. It says: 'Cane attachée au cou qui garde ses petits'—guarding her little ones, the duck is attached by the neck. What happens if the 'little ones' wander off, or up comes Monsieur Renard?

Waterfowl Winners at Tours 2010: second from the left is Anthony Re (Call Duck specialist and show organizer). In the centre is Runner specialist Colin Brierley (UK) flanked by Paolo and Desy Ongareffo from Italy.