



Exhibiting 4-H Poultry

Sheila E. Scheideler
Extension Poultry Specialist



At many Nebraska county fairs, 4-H poultry exhibitors have two areas in which they can compete: exhibition of their birds and the showmanship of their birds.

The following information will help the 4-H exhibitor prepare for both types of exhibition. For a bird to place in its class at a show, it must be in the best possible show condition for the time of the year. Good show condition may be defined as a healthy, well-conditioned bird, exhibiting full feather cover and free of disease and parasites.

Selection

To compete in a poultry show, a bird should be a good representative of a standard pure breed. It is a good idea to consult the American Poultry Association's (APA) Standard of Perfection and do some research into the chosen breed. Crossbreeds may be shown in a production or hybrid laying hen class at most fairs. Some county fairs also will offer a "pet class" for hybrid roosters and crossbred birds. Disqualifications, defects, or eliminations also place the bird at a disadvantage. *Figures 1-8* show examples of disqualifications.

Pictures of Disqualifying Features



Figure 1. Lopped rose comb



Figure 2. Lopped single comb



Figure 3. Side springs



Figure 4. Split comb



Figure 5. Vulture hocks

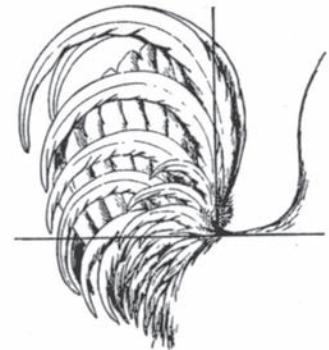


Figure 6. Squirrel tail



Figure 7. Wry tail

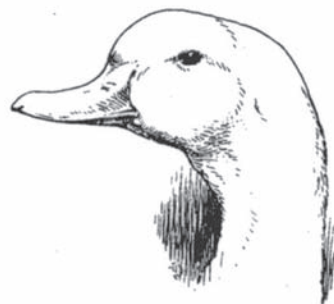
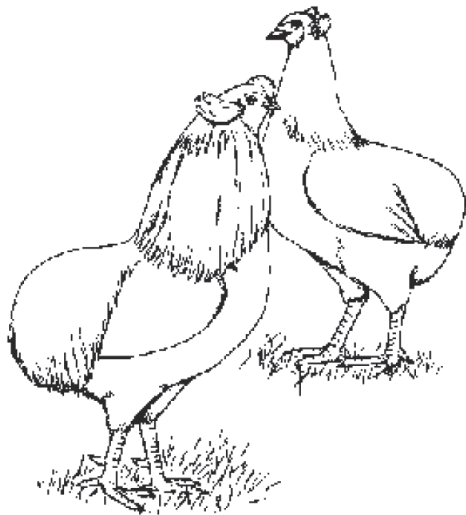


Figure 8. Scoop bill

Male and Female Araucana



Male and Female Ameraucana

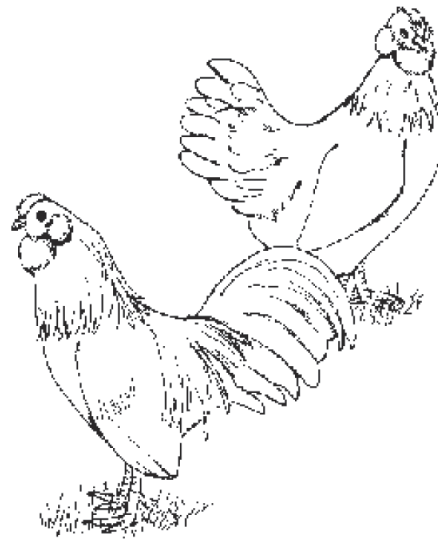


Figure 9. Araucana vs Ameraucana Breed Characteristics.

Additional defects

- Underweight or overweight
- Comb — course texture, overly large; more or fewer points than required
- Eyes — permanent injury
- Wattles — course, wrinkled
- Wings — missing primaries or secondaries
- Tail — main tail feathers absent, sickles absent
- Breast — crooked keel or breast bone
- Shank and toes — crooked toes, too many/not enough toes, wrong shank color

Note: A “Silkie” chicken having any yellow skin/shanks or red comb is an immediate disqualification. (Such Silkies should not be kept for breeding as they have impure qualities.)

- Not proper color or pattern for the breed

Note: Be aware that the bird also must be identified correctly for its breed. This is especially true when showing an Araucana or Ameraucana (Figure 9). If the birds were ordered through a hatchery catalog under the name “Araucana” and they have a tail, it more likely is an “Ameraucana.” Some hatcheries do not specify the differences between these, but list them under one name. Both birds can lay blue, green, or sometimes pink-tinted eggs, although blue eggs are the most common. Any bird with Araucana/Ameraucana genetics may lay a blue egg, as it is a dominant trait.

Araucana has:

- NO tail, is rumpless
- Ear tufts

Ameraucana has:

- Tail
- Muffs
- Beard

The birds also need to meet breed characteristics such as body shape, tail carriage (*Figures 10-11*), comb type (*Figures 14-17*), feather pattern, etc. for the breed exhibited. This information can be obtained from the already mentioned American Standard of Perfection (www.amerpoultryassn.com). This is a good reference book to own for serious exhibitors of standard and bantam breeds.

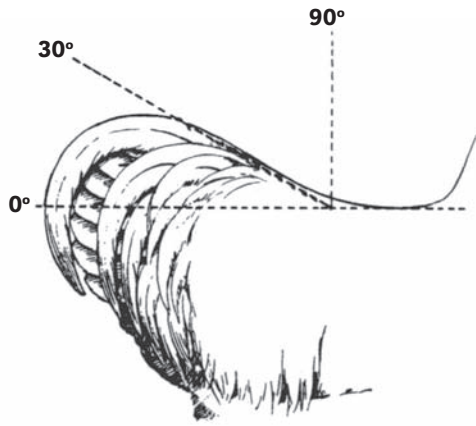


Figure 10. How to measure the angle of a rooster's tail.

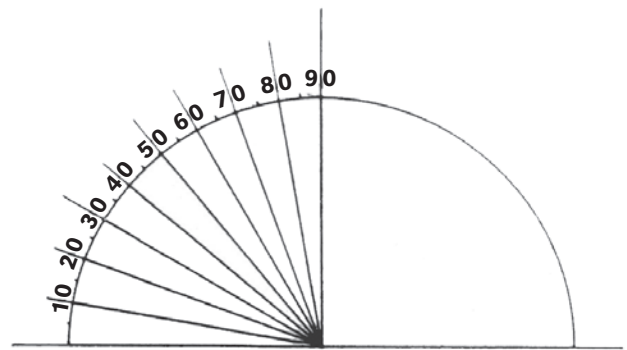


Figure 11. Diagram showing degrees above the horizontal (chicken's back to measure the tail angle).

Training

The first step in showing is to “tame” or train the bird to become accustomed to being handled and examined by the judge. Training is essential to prepare for a showmanship contest. The training can be accomplished by working with the bird daily to familiarize it to being caught and examined.

Select birds to show several weeks prior to the show date if possible. Allow sufficient time for preparation and training. Birds should be trained and prepared to display their best qualities. Birds unaccustomed to confinement in cages do not “show” to their best advantage unless trained beforehand.

Getting birds accustomed to a cage is a simple process if started early. At least two weeks before the show, place each show bird in a cage similar to ones used at the poultry show. Handle each bird two to three times a day in a manner similar to that used in judging.

Handling the Bird In and Out of the Cage

Step 1. Approach the cage slowly, open the door quietly, and prepare to remove the bird, head first. Maneuver the bird until it stands with its head to your right or left. Reach into the coop and across the back of the bird with your right hand (left-handed persons will use their left hand), firmly but gently grasp the most distant wing at the shoulder. Keep the wing folded and close to the bird's body.

Step 2. Rotate the bird in the cage so its head is pointing toward you and the open door.

Step 3. Slide your free hand, palm upward, underneath the bird's breast. Simultaneously, grasp the bird's right leg (just above the hock joint) between your thumb and index finger while clasping the left leg between the second and third fingers. This places your index and second fingers between the bird's legs. The keel bones should be resting upon the palm of your hand. Bring the bird out of the cage head first, keeping its head toward you. After holding the bird for awhile, open the wings and examine various parts of the body. Always return the bird to the cage head first and lower it gently to the floor of the cage.

To determine body balance and “set of legs” (leg sturdiness), some judges like to drop heavy breed birds about 6 inches to the cage floor. A quick recovery means good balance and placement of legs.

Once accustomed to this confinement and handling, the bird should present a good appearance to the judge. Many entries of good merit aren't seriously considered by the judge because they've not been trained. Frightened birds tend to stand in a crouched rather than normal position, thus their true type is not revealed to the judge. The tail may touch the cage and be carried to one side, the bird may become restless from confinement, the cage litter may feel unnatural, and the bird may assume an awkward posture. Birds unaccustomed to handling may struggle when examined. Any of these situations will give the judge unfavorable impressions. Therefore, it is recommended to train the birds to get used to a cage.

Preparing for a Show

After the birds have been selected and trained, it's time to prepare for the show. The birds should be cleaned (washed) and groomed about 48 hours before

the show. A wet bird will take roughly 18-24 hours to dry. “Fluffy” breeds such as the Cochin or Silkie can be dried with a hair dryer. It will help keep the feathers fluffy, but blow drying a tight-feathered breed such as the Cornish will result in an undesirable feather coat. Most breeds will look better if left to dry naturally.

Washing Birds

When white plumage is soiled and dirty, it does not look good in a show cage. Birds with light-colored plumage (such as white, blue, or buff) should be washed before they are taken to a poultry show. Carefully wash white-feathered breeds such as the Cornish. Birds with dark-colored plumages such as Barred Plymouth Rock chickens, Rouen ducks, and Bronze turkeys, very seldom need to be washed unless their plumage becomes severely soiled.

Learning to wash birds isn’t difficult, but it’s best to practice on some birds not intended for exhibit. It is best to wash birds the day or night (18 hours) before they are to be exhibited or taken to the show.

If washing a number of birds, the multitub method is best (a soaping tub and two to three rinse tubs). Washing just a few can be done in a large tub (large birds) or sink (bantam chickens and ducks). In either case, the area in which the birds are to be washed should be 80°F to 90°F and free from drafts. Have cages to place the birds in after they are washed. If the birds will be returned to floor pens after they are washed, it is important to place plenty of clean straw or shavings on the floor to keep the birds from becoming soiled again.

Multitub Method:

Items required:

- Detergent. Some detergents make feathers dry and brittle. Recommended detergents include: Lux flakes, Ivory, Cheer, or Casteel soap.
- Vinegar
- Bluing (such as Quic Silver, found in the equine section. Other bluing shampoos also may be found in the pet aisle.)
- Sponge
- Soft, old toothbrush, and tooth picks
- Four washing tubs for light plumage, three for dark plumage or a double sink

- 10 percent Permethrin (such as Gordon’s Horse, Livestock & Premise Spray. Follow the directions on the container. This can be found in most farm supply stores.)
- Towels
- Hair dryer (optional) — be careful to not burn the birds
- Pure silk cloth (optional)

The first washing tub is used for the actual cleaning of the birds. Soap or detergent is added to warm water in the tub. Make good suds before putting the bird into the water. Grasp the bird with both hands and lower it gently into the water, holding the wings so they cannot flap. With the bird standing on the bottom of the tub, release one hand but hold the bird firmly with the other. With the free hand, gently move the feathers on all parts of the body so the soap and water will penetrate to the skin. Then with a small brush, sponge, or hand, work the soapy water through the feathers. Make sure to rub the feathers from base to tip, with the grain, to prevent feather breakage. ***Do not put the bird’s head under water.***

While the bird is still in the first tub, take a soft, old toothbrush and scrub its legs gently to remove any dirt or molting scales. The 10 percent permethrin can be added to the second washing tubs to help rid the bird of external parasites. Gloves should be worn as permethrin can irritate the skin. When the plumage has been thoroughly washed, transfer the birds to the second tub containing a small amount of vinegar, and thoroughly rinse out as much of the soap as possible. The vinegar will help remove the soap. It is important to remove all the soap; otherwise the feathers will stick and be streaked.

For birds with feathers other than white, the third tub should contain plain water and a fourth tub is not required. For white birds, the third rinse tub should contain a small amount of bluing, just enough to give the water a slight blue color to help whiten, condition, and give feathers a sheen. It is important not to get the water too blue or it will give the plumage a bluish tinge, and too much bluing may dye the feathers. White birds then are placed in a fourth tub with plain water for a final rinsing.

When the washed bird is removed from the final rinsing, the plumage should be dried as much as possible. Work as much water as possible out with the hands, then dry with a towel. After birds are thoroughly dry, their feathers can be polished with a pure silk cloth.

Birds should be placed in a drying cage in a warm room. They cannot stand excessive heat, so avoid placing them too close to a heat source. Take care that the birds do not soil their plumage during the drying process. If two or more birds have been washed, keep them separated until dry. A bird can be washed in 15 to 20 minutes. The feet and legs need a little extra attention with the sponge or soft tooth brushes. A toothpick can help get some of the more stubborn dirt out from under the scales if need be.

Crested breeds need more grooming than other birds. The crest especially needs a great deal of attention. After washing the body plumage, hold the bird by the legs, allowing the head to hang down. Submerge the crest feathers, keeping the eyes above the water, working the suds into the topknot until it is well-lathered. If crest is extremely dirty, sprinkle a few drops of mild liquid soap into the head feathers. However, no amount of washing will brighten a crest that is yellow, brassy, or dry from too much sun. (A few hours a day in the sun won't cause brassiness of the feathers.)

Don't expect to stay dry and don't expect the birds to be very cooperative. Most birds do not naturally enjoy bathing in water.

Once the bird is clean and dry, keep it on clean litter until show time. Rubbing a little oil (cocoa butter, glycerin, mineral/baby oil, or olive oil) on the comb, wattles, legs, and feet helps clean these areas better and gives them a nice polished look.

Check the length of the nails and spurs; the older the bird the longer the nail and spurs tend to be. Nails can be trimmed with a dog nail clipper, but be careful not to trim the nails too short as they could bleed profusely. The spurs are a bit more difficult to trim but can be done with a heavy duty clipper. It is generally unnecessary to trim spurs, but blunting may be more helpful if they are long and sharp.

Show Time

Here are some things that will need to be done prior to the show after selecting and cleaning the bird(s):

1. Obtain an entry form to enter the birds; it may be required well ahead of some shows. The entry will have the show rules, which are important to know about before show time.
2. Have the birds blood tested before the show if required. Plan to have this done at least two to four weeks before the show.

3. Birds may have to be banded for identification purposes. Plastic or metal leg bands work well for this purpose and are available from suppliers such as Murray McMurray Hatcheries.

Some things that should NOT be done:

1. Do not show other people's birds in your name.
2. Do not talk to the judges while they are working. They are more than happy to talk to you after they are done with the show.
3. Do not crowd the birds on the way to the show; they will get ruffled and possibly soiled. They should be transported in individual cages or boxes.
4. Crossbreds should not be shown unless there happens to be a special class such as "Pet."

Poultry Showmanship

Poultry showmanship is a class where exhibitors show the judge their exhibits. The exhibitor handles the bird and explains the good and bad points it may have. It is unnecessary to have an exceptional bird for showmanship because it is the exhibitor who is being judged, not the bird.

The key to showmanship is knowledge of poultry in general, about the breed being presented, and a tame bird to work with.

Personal appearance is as important as the condition of the bird. Appear well-groomed and wear clean, neat clothing. It is probably required that a 4-H T-shirt or county specific shirt be worn at the Nebraska county fairs.

Good, willing attitudes also are important. Always be attentive and respond quickly to the judge's request.

The most important part of the presentation is the oral part. This is where poultry and breed knowledge is displayed. Point out any strong or weak points the bird may have. These would include structural faults such as crooked toes or backs, or mismarked feathers for the particular breed. This should last no longer than 10 minutes, and four to six minutes should be quite sufficient. Remember, it's not the bird that is being judged, but how well the exhibitor can show knowledge of the bird.

Steps in Poultry Showmanship

1. Remove bird from its cage and carry it to the judging table. Depending on the show, exhibitors may be waiting in a line to get to the table. The bird should be carried in a way that is nondistressing and secure. The exhibitor will be judged on ability to handle and carry the bird.
2. The time to show the bird is when the judge approaches the exhibitor. Start the presentation with an introduction of yourself and your breed of bird. It may sound something like this:

“I am contestant number _____ and my bird is a (breed of bird). This breed is used mainly for (meat/eggs/dual purpose).”

3. Next, spread the wings. This shows color patterns if they exist. It also is a good idea to show the feather condition and any feathers that may be missing (i.e. flight feathers, primaries, etc.). Comment on the color of the wing feathers at this time.
4. When examining the back, show the feather undercoat for proper shading. Point out any defects the bird may have. Show the width of the back, placing thumb and forefinger of your free hand along the rib cage, sliding along the back toward the tail. This shows the length and width of the bird.
5. Examine and show the keel. Also turn the bird over and examine the color of the breast and under color.
6. Show the feet of the bird to the judge and describe the condition of the feet and toes (i.e. straight, crooked, etc.), feather stubs, and proper color of shanks for the breed being shown.
7. Show the tail carriage by flipping the tail quickly up and down. Avoid doing this with a great force, just enough to get the tail to fan out, then let it return to its normal position. Examine the tail feathers for proper color and condition.
8. Return the bird to the judging table and pose it for the judge. Give the judge time to see the bird, then pick it up and ask the judge if he/she has any questions.

Note: Regardless of the steps that are listed above, first and foremost listen to what the judge asks you to do with your bird.

Helpful Guidelines:

- Begin working with the bird several weeks in advance of the show.
- Be clean and well-groomed; wear proper clothing — no shorts, sandals, tank tops, or jewelry (rings, bracelets, big dangly earrings that may distract the bird undesirably).
- Speak clearly and loud enough for the judge to hear and understand you. Look at the judge when speaking to him/her.
- Show the bird and not yourself to the judge.
- Respond to the judge’s questions and requests. You may be required to handle a different bird, so be prepared to do this.
- Have a general knowledge about poultry and the breed being shown; the judge may ask questions.
- Learn and know the parts of the bird (*Figures 12-13*).

Parts of the Chicken Feet

Figure 12 is a typical (male) foot for a four-toed breed. The female feet are the same, except for the length of the spur. Some females can and do grow spurs later in life.

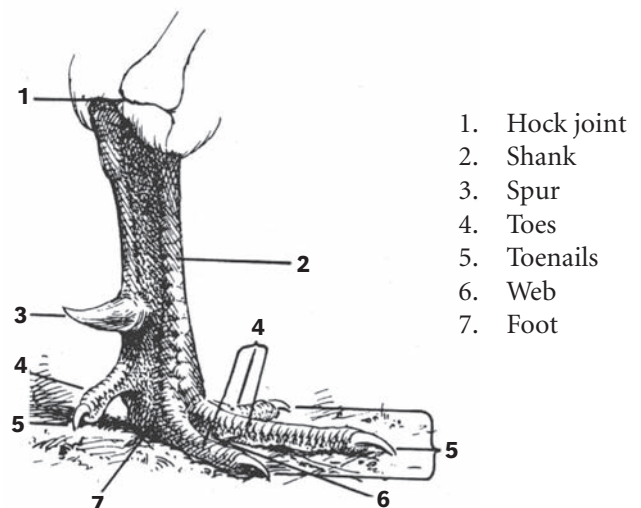


Figure 12. Typical (male) foot for a four-toed breed.

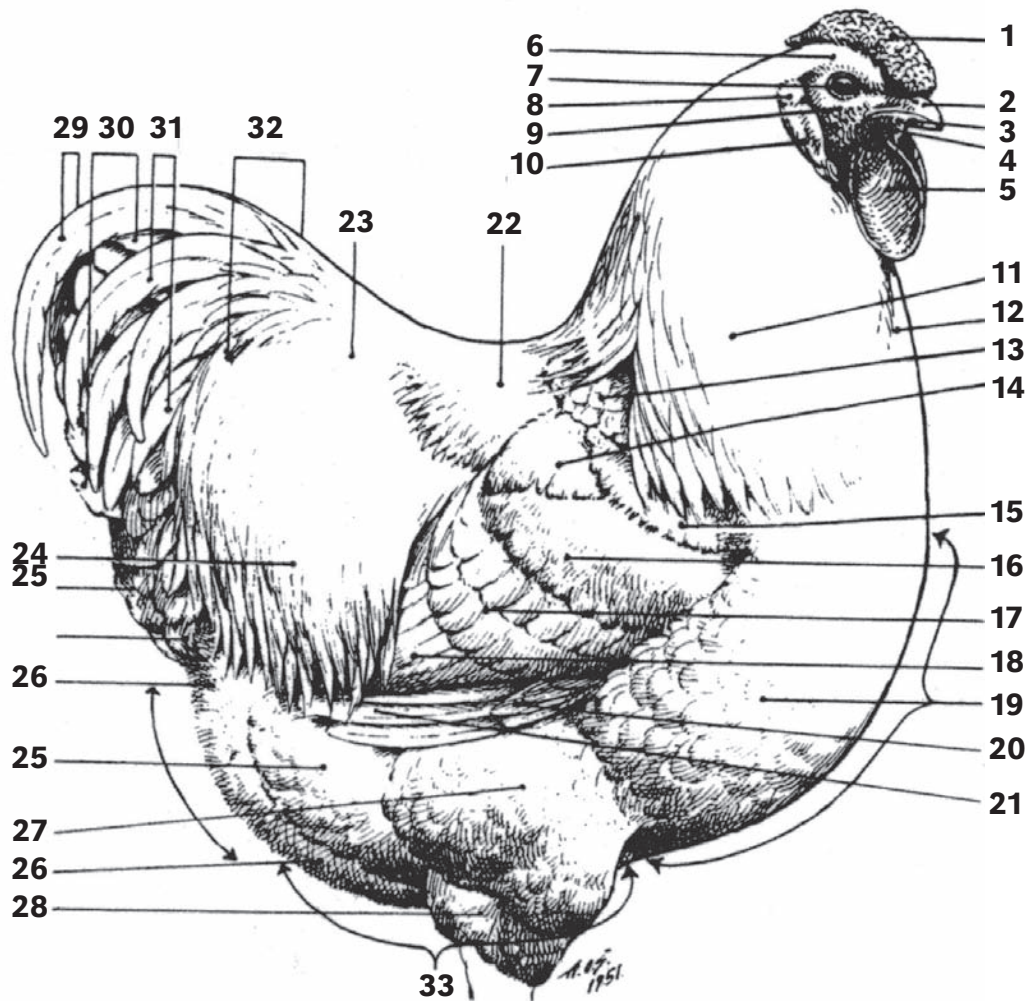


Figure 13. Parts of the chicken

- | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Comb | 12. Front of neck plumage | 23. Upper saddle |
| 2. Upper mandible/beak | 13. Cape | 24. Lower saddle |
| 3. Lower mandible/beak | 14. Shoulder | 25. Rear body feathers |
| 4. Throat | 15. Wing front | 26. Fluff or stern |
| 5. Wattle | 16. Wing bow | 27. Lower thigh feathers |
| 6. Skull | 17. Wing coverts/bars | 28. Hock plumage |
| 7. Eye | 18. Secondaries of wing bay | 29. Main sickles |
| 8. Ear | 19. Breast | 30. Main tail |
| 9. Face | 20. Primary coverts | 31. Lesser sickles |
| 10. Earlobe | 21. Primaries | 32. Tail coverts |
| 11. Hackle | 22. Back | 33. Abdomen |

Typical Combs

Single comb (Figures 14-15): An ideal single comb is composed of five separate points (labeled as “2”), a strong base, and even position on the head (labeled as “1,” Figure 14). The Blade (labeled as “3”) should be obviously separate from the last point. The ideal comb also will have a strong, even base (Figure 15).

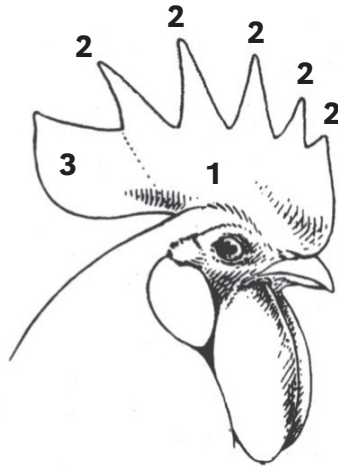


Figure 14. Single comb.



Figure 15. Ideal comb.

Sultan breed comb (Figure 16): A V-shaped comb should have two well-defined, hornlike sections joined at the base.

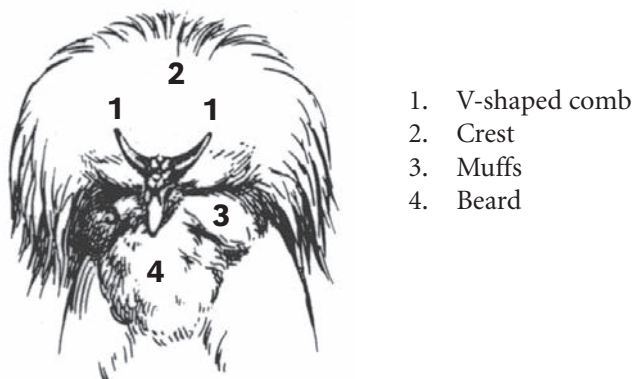


Figure 16. Sultan head breed.

Buttercup comb (Figure 17): This comb should have the same number of points on each side of the base. They should be a mirror image of each other, like a crown. Any points protruding from the middle is a major defect.



Figure 17. Buttercup comb.

Rose comb (Figure 18): The rounded points should sit on the head evenly. If lopped the bird will be disqualified.

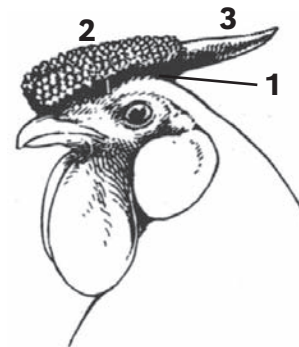


Figure 18. Rose comb.

Strawberry comb (Figure 19): The comb is low set, compact, somewhat egg-shaped with the larger portion forward and the rear portion of the comb extending no farther than the middle of the skull.



Figure 19. Strawberry comb.

Cushion comb (*Figure 20*): The comb is low, compact, and relatively small. It should be smooth, possess no depressions or spikes, and extend no farther than the middle of the skull.



Figure 20. Cushion comb.

Pea comb (*Figure 21*): The comb is of medium length, and comb on the top of the head. It has three low lengthwise ridges, the center one standing a bit taller than the two and will have small rounded serrations.



Figure 21. Pea comb.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Kody Sok, former UNL Extension assistant, to this publication.

Photo credit:

Left cover photo: Vicki Jedlicka, Lancaster County Extension
Right cover photo: Stephen Ausmus, USDA

This publication has been peer reviewed.

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.