Breed in Focus: Barred Plymouth Rocks

By Tom Newbould

Every poultry fancier has a reason to take up their chosen breed and variety but for me there is something special about Barred Plymouth Rocks, or ‘Barred Rocks’ as they are commonly known. They represent a true test for the exhibition poultry fancier and a rewarding experience when you feel you’ve ‘got it right’ after the breeding season. Those fanciers who choose to take up the challenge intricately marked bird where the markings were correct and stylish type - will find them, a Barred Rock is one of the most intricately and precisely marked varieties of all poultry, or at least some fanciers would say so.

Barred Rocks have attracted some famous names over the years, but my own story began by accident in 1987 with two of the biggest names, the ‘grandees’ Will Burdett and the late Dr Clive Carefoot, along with the equally famous Jim Shaw of Lancaster and Ian Allsoby, latterly of Poultry Club fame. To tell the tale candidly, I visited a show, wanted to buy an Orpington, was re-directed to a Barred Rock hen owned by David Jarmain, by Will Burdett who recommended the breed. Ian Allsoby, who knew my family kindly took me to visit Jim Shaw to select a suitable male by torch light. After breeding for a year, I had two pullets from Kevin Downick in Cornwall, which was a great support over the early years, along with Alan Burnett, Tom Heginbotham and Geoff Pardey. The late John Tomson told me some birds that were ‘Clive Carefoot’s strain’, including his Riddick Valley winner, and I managed to breed some birds that were in the tickets at the Club Show, including winning a class under the judging of Clive Carefoot himself. I had written to Clive 5 times asking if he had stock for sale and he always said ‘no’, but after winning that class things changed, and on the Sunday of the show he returned with a Cockerel for me that he said, ‘would do me some good.’ When I asked how much I owed him, he said: ‘Nothing, just stick at it!’

This year is my 25th year of breeding Barred Rocks and I last wrote about them in Fancy Fowl back in 2003, having won Best Barred Plymouth Rock at both Plymouth Rock Club Shows at the National and Federation Shows, showing just a single Barred on each occasion. The Large Barred pullet that won the award at the Scottish National Show in 2012, This pullet displays very good colour and barring, including an abundance of beetles green, and good type. She won at the Scottish National Show in 2012.

Stafford went on to win Best Large Soft Feather Hens which remains my biggest win, and the last time a Large Barred or indeed Barred bantam took one of the main awards at the classics.

The fact I entered just a single Barred Rock at each show may seem like incredibly good odds but of course behind those two birds were years of breeding, and over 20 years of selecting them for the club shows. In contrast, in 2011, at the same shows I showed 13 Barred Rocks at each show, won ten of the twelve Barred Rock classes, the exceptions being the two pullet classes. On both occasions it was the winning pullet owned by someone else (Kevin) that took the award for Best Barred in 2011 is probably the best ever breeding season I have had with Barrels. However, that is the result of a major reconstruction of my strain which started 6 years ago, so nothing with Barrels can be classed as being easy.

A Heavy Breed – Barred Rocks Today

Barred Bantams

When I started with Barred Rocks, the bantams were always strong and vigorous. When they came into hand you could tell you were holding a true heavy breed. However, in more recent times a Barred Rock bantam would be regarded by many fanciers, particularly of other breeds and in comparison to the Buff Rocks as ‘small and weedy’. When I last judged the Club Show in 2009, I was shocked to find a really weedy group of birds on show, many charaded by some of the true bantams and they certainly would probably some truth in that but it was not the real story, as the leading fanciers, including very adept breeders like Robin, balanced type with markings, and actually set type and style as the main factor. No, it was more likely to be the loss of several leading strains through retirement or death, notably Tom Heiglithorn and Clive Carefoot, along with a pooling together of surplus stock from a few remaining strains, my own included. This led to a much-reduced gene pool, and a gradual decline of interest from the occasional entrants for most breeders. So, when I judged the Club Show in 2009, I was shocked to find a really weedy group of birds on show, many charaded by some of the true bantams and they certainly would have looked like the odd one, or should I say ‘inferior’ out on Championship Row next to the Wyandottes, Australorps, Snows, and Orpingtons had one made it that far.

So, I was determined to do something to keep the breed alive and fortunately others, like Kevin and Geoff, had also decided they.

This male displays very good type, but is a Light-steel or pullet breeder. He is brown and white, not the required high and white. He can be used in the breeding pen but should not be exhibited.

Champion with a Buff Cockrel at the National in 2007.

The state of the Barred bantams was, some would suggest, the result of many years of ‘breeding for markings over type’. The Buffs, they would say, had not suffered in this way and true enough, just look at Robin Rams’ birds. There was

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C werefoot, and his famous cockerel ‘Herbert’ was the last Large Barred

Large Barreds

needed to increase the size of the bantams to correct proportions. At the 2011 Club Show, it was fantastic to hear of a number of complimentary comments, including from the likes of Frank Clark and ‘It’s nice to see Barred bantams the right size,’ or ‘At last, some Barred bantams will be in a very good state and I think I am close to my personal aim of having teams of Barreds at the Club Show that can stand toe-to-toe with Robin Rams’ teams of Buffs.

Some Large Barred chicks owned by Jan Kemp, showing promise. (Photo by J Kemp)

Barred Rocks were all but extinct fortunately Jim Shaw had one last old, but otherwise oozing quality. and eventually after 3-4 years further delighted when they won all four classes at the Club Show.

Over the years since those stock have been distributed far and wide, and birds tracing back to that male of Jim Shaw’s have clocked up some fantastic wins for numerous breeders. With my own birds, I was really delighted with the birds I bred last year, and further delighted when they won all four classes at the Club Show: In fact, I really thought I had a Cockeral that fulfilled the famous ‘Herbert’, that was certainly the best I’ve ever bred. He attracted some favourable comments from non-Rock breeders who I really respect, and of course typically remained uncarded, beaten by his two raptog brothers! We have some really enthusiastic Barred Rock breeders at the moment and the demand for stock is high, so I think it will be possible for one of us to emulate Clive’s achievement with a Large Barred in the future – I certainly hope so.

A Good Barred Rock

So, what should and does a good Barred Rock look like? Well firstly, and critically, it must have good Plymouth Rock type. This is non-negotiable as without it the bird is not a Rock. That type though, is a real joy, being stylish, subtly curvaceous, and strong and powerful.

Each and every feather of a Barred Rock should feature a set of parallel, straight bars from the base of the feather to the top, ending with a Black tip. The colour of these bars is alternately ‘beetle green sheen,’ not grey, not gunmetal black or black as found in Wyandottes, Scots Grey, and Murrays, but ‘black with a beetle green sheen’ as in Australorp. I have seen numerous judges award points, including best in show, to Barred Rock males that are ‘Light’ and this is quite simply a mistake. An exhibition Barred Rock male must be the same colour as the female otherwise he is the wrong colour. A bird the same colour as the majority of Barred Wyandotte Males is not for show – he is a pullet-bredder (or in some circumstances can be used to breed cockerels too). On the continent of Europe, these Light males are shown but here we are in Great Britain, and it is an insult to generations of leading Barred Rock breeders to award a prize to a Light Barred Rock unless it is in a Utility Class or behind a correctly coloured male. Certainly it is quite ridiculous to award it Best in Show – please read the standard and examine the bird!

Breeders of Barred Rocks

Above all, Barred Rock breeders need patience and attention to detail in the birds they select to breed from. Of course, as for breeding exhibition quality Barred Rocks and the challenge of producing a bird with superb markings and type, you have a number of things to consider above and beyond ensuring your foundation stock are of good quality. Firstly, the mating of an exhibition (i.e. correctly coloured) male and an exhibition female will produce a surprise to the first-time breeder. Half the offspring (according to averages half male and half female) will resemble the parents and be suitable for exhibition. Of the remainder, 25% will be completely black, with black-green legs, and these will all be female. The other 25% will be grey/light barred males. Both the latter types are unsuitable for showing but should not be discarded outright – they can become a useful component of the breeding pen. The black females, in particular, can catch the new breeder by surprise and in the past have sometimes been called ‘sports.’
You can spot the different offspring at day-old according to down their heads. The light cockerels are the same but with a much more pronounced dot on their head. The Black pullets have no dot on their head. In the case of the former, it is usually prudent to wait until the first chick feathers to avoid accidentally culling exhibition barring chicks. I will usually allow all the types to grow on then select the most promising Black pullets (for type, sex, and style) and the best Light Cockerels (for barring and type) and keep a small number along with my exhibition barred birds. The latter group are kept for longer but any bird with an evident fault (such as squawk shanks, poor comb etc) is eliminated. Gradually as the birds get closer to maturity I select hard for type and barring. My mantra is the same as it always has been – breed as many as you can from your few best birds then cull hard. This is what Clive Carefoot drilled into me. I have a few different family groups (or lines as I call them) so that I can introduce ‘fresh blood’ in a safer, related way should the need arise rather than go to another breeder.

So, why the different offspring? Well, the simple explanation you will find a much more expansive one in Clive Carefoot’s ‘Cockerel Poultry Breeding’ or in Grant’s (21st Century Poultry Breeding) is that the gene responsible for barring is present in two ways. In a correctly coloured exhibition bird, it is equally present alongside a black gene. The barred female carries only a single barred gene, while the Light cockerel carries a similar double to the barring gene. The relationship itself is similar to the breeding of blue breeds where you get 50% Blue birds (equivalent to the exhibition barred), 25% Splash (equivalent to the Light cockerel), and 25% Black (equivalent to the Black pullet). With barring being ‘sex-linked’ the exhibition pen will never produce any self-black males or Light females. Now, the educated breeders among you will realise the next possibility – in Blues from a closely bred line, by mating a male in order to produce males more of a cuckoo pattern (since tried to use pure Black Wyandotte but this produces more of a cuckoo pattern (since the pure Black Wyandotte carries no barring modifiers). Over time, the main task would be to refine the barring but in my experience this would take 5-6 generations.

General observations are that in breeding Barred Rocks, pay attention to the barring – that it is according to the standard and that it is sharply defined in the under-colour. Once you lose the under-colour, it is very difficult to recover it. The under-colour is a very good indicator as to the quality of barring in the rest of the bird in terms of colour, i.e. is the white bland, and is the black beetle green? Try and take repeated looks at your birds, from close by and afar. Take a rest then repeat it – you will gradually develop the habit of efficiently selecting barring.

It is also important to select first for type and then for barring. What we are aiming for is perfect barring on a beautifully typed and shaped bird that truly represents the Plymouth Rock.

Different types of barring – a quick guide

Ideal barring (according to the standard): Ground colour white with a blush tinged, barred with black beetle green sheen, the bars to be straight, moderately narrow; of equal breadth and sharply defined, to continue through to the shanks. Every feather to be finished with a black tip. The fluff or under-colour is also barred. The neck and saddle hackle, wing bow, and tail to correspond with the rest of the body, presenting a uniformity of colour throughout.

Fine barring: This is used to describe the barley plumage of a bird which displays precise, narrow, and uniform barring – particularly males in the hackle areas. The barring should still be even – i.e. Black and white part the same size.

Coarse barring: This is where a bird has even but very broad barring – the opposite of fine. It fails according to the standard by not being ‘moderately narrow.’

Continental (or convex) barring: In Europe and some other countries, there is no requirement for the barring to be straight, therefore you get a convex or rounded effect. This can be seen in some British large Barreds (remember they mostly go back to my 1994 mating involving Continental;) and also in many Barred Wyandottes, as the feather is rounded not flat sided.

Even barring: This is another way of saying the bird is ‘well-barred’ being of the correct proportion and evenly spaced.

Mooney barring: Usually seen in females, this is where the black barring bleeds into the white part, or the bird carries too much black, giving a ‘mooney green’ appearance.

Dark barring: Also usually seen in females, this is where the black bar is too large in comparison to the white part – as opposed to being evenly proportion.

Black feathers: No-one can produce a perfect Barred Rock without the odd black feather. These can be removed before a show, but you will need to exclude birds that show an abundance of black feathers.

Flight markings

The flight markings in sing feathers deserve particular mention. Often a judge is unsure whether it is the birds (a Barred in the black part of the barring, and/or the beetle green) is very high. Therefore it is not possible to ‘breed this out’ and nor would I advise it as you will then diminish the quality of black.

Give them a go

Barred Plymouth Rocks are a challenge, but get it right and it is an extremely rewarding one. We are lucky that currently we have a set of breeders who are willing to keep going year after year, and who are very enthusiastic. I cannot mention them all here but Barreds are certainly having a mini-revival and actually outnumbered Buff Rocks in many of the classes last year. If you take them up, then you will need patience and dedication but you will find many people to help you out along the way.