

= Silkie =

The Silkie ( sometimes spelled Silky ) is a breed of chicken named for its atypically fluffy plumage , which is said to feel like silk , and satin . The breed has several other unusual qualities , such as black skin and bones , blue earlobes , and five toes on each foot , whereas most chickens only have four . They are often exhibited in poultry shows , and appear in various colors . In addition to their distinctive physical characteristics , Silkies are well known for their calm , friendly temperament . It is among the most docile of poultry . Hens are also exceptionally broody , and care for young well . Though they are fair layers themselves , laying only about three eggs a week , they are commonly used to hatch eggs from other breeds and bird species due to their broody nature .

= = History = =

It is unknown exactly where or when fowl with their singular combination of attributes first appeared , but the most well documented point of origin is ancient China ( hence another occasionally encountered name for the bird , Chinese silk chicken ) . Other places in Southeast Asia have been named as possibilities , such as India and Java . The earliest surviving written account of Silkies comes from Marco Polo , who wrote of a " furry chicken " in the 13th century during his travels in Asia . In 1598 , Ulisse Aldrovandi , a writer and naturalist at the University of Bologna , Italy , published a comprehensive treatise on chickens which is still read and admired today . In it , he spoke on " wool @-@ bearing chickens " and ones " clothed with hair like that of a black cat " .

Silkies most likely made their way to the West via the Silk Route and maritime trade . The breed was recognized officially in North America with acceptance into the Standard of Perfection in 1874 . Once Silkies became more common in the West , many myths were perpetuated about them . Early Dutch breeders told buyers they were the offspring of chickens and rabbits , while sideshows promoted them as having actual mammalian fur .

In the 21st century , Silkies are one of the most popular and ubiquitous ornamental breeds of chicken . They are often kept as ornamental fowl or pet chickens by backyard keepers , and are also commonly used to incubate and raise the offspring of other chickens and waterfowl like ducks and geese and game birds such as quail and pheasants .

= = Characteristics = =

Silkies are considered a bantam breed in some countries , but this varies according to region and many breed standards class them officially as large fowl ; the bantam Silkie is actually a separate variety most of the time . Almost all North American strains of the breed are bantam @-@ sized , but in Europe the standard @-@ sized is the original version . However , even standard Silkies are relatively small chickens , with the males weighing only four pounds ( 1 @.@ 8 kg ) , and females weighing three pounds ( 1 @.@ 36 kg ) . The American Standard of Perfection calls for males that are 36 ounces ( 1 kg ) , and females that are 32 ounces ( 910 grams ) .

Silkie plumage was once unique among chicken breeds , however in recent years silkie feathering has been developed in several breeds , mostly notably the Chabo , where it is now standardised in Britain and the Netherlands . It has been compared to silk , and to fur . The overall result is a soft , fluffy appearance . Their feathers lack functioning barbicels , and are thus similar to down on other birds . This characteristic leaves Silkies unable to fly .

Silkies appear in two distinct varieties : bearded and non @-@ bearded . Bearded Silkies have an extra muff of feathers under the beak area that covers the earlobes . They also are separated according to color . Colors of Silkie recognized for competitive showing include black , blue , buff , grey , partridge , and white . Alternative hues , such as cuckoo , lavender , red , and splash also exist . The standards of perfection call for all Silkies to have a small walnut @-@ colored comb , dark wattles , and turquoise @-@ blue earlobes . In addition to these defining characteristics , Silkies have five toes on each foot . Other breeds which exhibit this rare trait include the Dorking , Faverolles , and Sultan .

All Silkies have black skin , bones and grayish @-@ black meat ; their Chinese language name is wu gu ji ( 乌骨鸡 ) , meaning ' black @-@ boned chicken ' . Melanism which extends beyond the skin into an animal 's connective tissue is a rare trait , and in chickens it is caused by fibromelanosis , which is a rare mutation believed to have begun in Asia . The Silkie and several other breeds descended from Asian stock possess the mutation . Disregarding color , the breed does not generally produce as much as the more common meat breeds of chicken .

Silkies lay a fair number of eggs , of a cream color , but production is often interrupted due to their extreme tendency to go broody ; a hen will produce 100 eggs in an ideal year . Their capacity for incubation , which has been selectively bred out of most fowl bred especially for egg production , is often exploited by poultry keepers by allowing Silkies to raise the offspring of other birds . In addition to being good mothers , Silkies are universally renowned for their calm , friendly temperament . They do well in confinement , and interact very well with children . This docility can cause Silkies to be bullied by more active or aggressive birds when kept in mixed flocks .

== Bantams ==

In the American Standard of Perfection , the standard male weight for the bantam Silkie is 1 kg ( 36 oz ) and for the female , 907 g ( 32 oz ) . The Australian Poultry Standard and British Poultry Standard call for Silkie bantams much smaller ; in the Australian , the standard weights are 680 g ( 25 oz ) for males and 570 g ( 20 oz ) for females . The British standard weight for bantam Silkies is 600 g ( 22 oz ) for males , and 500 g for females ( 18 oz ) .

== Polydactyly ==

Silkies are also known for their polydactyly , usually manifesting as an additional 1 @-@ 2 digits in the foot . The genetic cause of this extra digit formation has been shown to be a SNP in a regulator of the SHH gene , called the ZPA Regulatory Sequence ( ZRS ) . This causes ectopic SHH expression in the anterior of the developing limb bud , leading to increased tissue growth and digits . Interestingly , while the feet of the Silkie display polydactyly , the wings have the standard tridactyly ( three digit ) arrangement . The Japanese Silkie initially develops additional digits in the wing as an embryo , but these are lost prior to hatching . The genetic cause behind Silkie polydactyly differs from those that cause polydactyly in the Dorking chicken breed , which is due to ectopic FGF4 expression in the AER , with ectopic SHH a secondary effect .

== In cuisine ==

The black meat of a Silkie is generally considered an unusual attribute in European and American cuisines . In contrast , several Asian cuisines consider Silkie meat a gourmet food . Chinese cuisine especially values the breed , but it is also a common ingredient in some Japanese , Cambodian , Vietnamese and Korean dishes . Areas where Chinese cuisine has been a strong influence , such as Malaysia , may also cook Silkie . As early as the 7th century , traditional Chinese medicine has held that chicken soup made with Silkie meat is a curative food . The usual methods of cooking include using Silkie to make broth , braising , and in curries . Traditional Chinese soup made with Silkie also uses ingredients such as wolfberries , Dioscorea polystachya ( mountain yam ) , orange peel , and fresh ginger . A few fusion restaurants in metropolitan areas of the West have also cooked it as a part of traditional American or French cuisine , such as in confit .