



Chris Graham: "Me and my birds" ([Practical Poultry](#), November 2013)

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Bonn voyage!



Markus, his daughter Momiji and his favourite black Rhineland cockerel. He's proud of the breed and believes UK keepers should appreciate it too.

Markus Radscheit, a Rhinelander born and bred but now living in Surrey, is passionate about his hardy, German fowl, and thinks we should be too!

For most people, the prospect of a house move is a pretty daunting one. Throw in the re-location of chickens and a dog, and things get just that little bit more complicated. However, if you add a new job into the mix and then, for good measure, stir in the sort of logistical headaches created by transferring your family away from loved ones and friends and off to a new country, then you have a recipe for jumbo-sized upheaval.

Nevertheless, this was exactly the set of events that faced Markus Radscheit and his young family eight months ago. Markus had a new job to start at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley, in Surrey, with a three-and-a-half-year contract. He'd trained at Kew many years ago, but this was going to be

different; a whole new experience for him, his family and his birds.

Seeking permission



Following a 'surprise' fox attack early on, Markus was forced to re-think his poultry protection measures. His birds now enjoy plenty of safe space.

Preparations for the move began months in advance. Markus had decided that he couldn't be parted from his beloved Rhineland chickens, although he did think it wise to reduce the number to bring to just a handful of his best, black examples. "I wasn't sure exactly what the procedure was for taking the chickens with us," he explained, "so I started by getting in touch with the British Embassy in Berlin.

"It turned out to be quite an involved process; there was plenty of paperwork to do and I had to get in touch with the Animal Import Regulation Authority, the ferry company and organise for the birds I'd be taking to visit the vet. It was essential that they got a clean bill of health and, in particular, were free from both Newcastle and Marek's disease."

Amazingly, on top of everything else, the family had decided to move themselves and, to cap it all, they set out from Bonn over Christmas! The whole process was long and tiring but, ultimately, successful. Once installed in their new home in the Surrey countryside, Markus got settled into his new job and was happy to give his precious few Rhineland chickens the run of the garden during the day. Then, disaster struck. Returning home one afternoon, Markus found his dead and dismembered cockerel on the lawn. "This was a shocking experience for us all," he remembers, "it was obviously a fox attack but I'd never considered this a risk as we don't have a problem with these predators in Germany. It simply never crossed my mind that they might pose a threat here and I was devastated at the loss of my only male bird. It left my breeding plans in ruins. But then the most amazing coincidence occurred. At exactly the moment I was burying the poor bird, the telephone rang."

Back in 2007, when Markus first started to become seriously involved with the Rhineland chicken, he set up a simple website and, thanks to that, was contacted by an enthusiast from Dorset. "He was looking for some hatching eggs, and I agreed to send him a batch from one of my black hens, and we kept in touch on and off after that. Well," Markus recalls with evident amazement at the memory, "it was him on the telephone and, quite by chance, he was calling to see if I'd be interested in a black cockerel he had going spare!"

Extra protection



Electrified poultry netting was an early purchase for Markus, triggered by the loss of his best cockerel to a fox.

So the second thing Markus did, after gratefully agreeing to have the spare cockerel, was to go out and buy several rolls of electrified poultry netting, an energiser and a battery. He built a large, secure run that he surrounded with sturdy, two-metre high, semi-rigid plastic fencing, plus a run of electrified poultry netting around the base. This approach has obviously worked wonders as he's not had any more trouble with foxes, despite there still being plenty around. He uses a live trap baited with cat food, and told me that he's caught six so far this year.

Despite the somewhat traumatic start, Markus is certainly settled into his poultry routine now and his birds are evidently doing well. But he's been amazed at the difference in the hobby here, compared to how things are in Germany. "I was very surprised at the relative freedom there is over here, with no requirement to register domestic flocks of under 50 birds," he explained. "In Germany every single bird has to be registered, and numbers have to be declared to the authorities every year thereafter. Keepers also have to pay an annual fee of €10. This money goes into a fund that's intended to deal with the costs involved with treating the next outbreak of Avian Influenza or similar, whenever it comes."

He went on to explain: "Keeping chickens in the UK is much more of a mainstream pastime than it is in Germany; hardly anybody here seems to raise an eyebrow when you say you have hens in the back garden. Over there the hobby is almost totally restricted to serious fanciers; pure breed keepers who are most interested in the exhibition side of the things.

"There are very few German keepers with a handful of hens in the back garden that are being kept solely as a source of eggs and pleasure. The popularity of keeping hybrid layers are home to provide eggs for the kitchen seems to be dying out in Germany; the exact opposite to here.

"What's more, the range of poultry-related products available out there is very limited in Germany compared with here. I was amazed to discover just how many specialist suppliers there are in the UK, catering totally for the domestic chicken market. You can even buy 'chicken treats'; such things simply aren't even heard of in Germany! Just flicking through the pages of this magazine leaves me stunned at the number of chicken-related that there are all working to support the hobby."

Rhineland reasons



Black Rhineland male in striking pose.

But I wanted to find out more about the Rhineland breed, and why Markus had latched on to it in the first place. He's been a poultry keeper ever since he was a boy so, with 148 pure breeds to choose from in Germany, what made him choose to specialise in such a rare one?

“Having been born and brought up in the Rhineland region of Germany, it seems an obvious choice to develop an interest in a chicken breed from the same area. Given my horticultural background, I'm naturally interested in the flora and fauna of the area, so when I discovered that there was a local breed of chicken too, I just couldn't resist. The Federal Agency for Agriculture classifies the Rhineland chicken as an 'endangered' breed, so it's definitely worth support and promotion for that reason alone. But I like it because it's a genuinely useful breed as well.”

The breed is actually just over 100 years old, and was developed by Dr Rudolf von Langen, who was a co-founder of a larger sugar production plant in the region. The story has it that in 1893, Langen set about trying to produce a hardy and productive chicken that would be useful to his many sugar beet farmers in the area, most of whom were battling a harsh climate, both in terms of weather and finances.

He crossed the indigenous Rhineland chicken with birds he brought in from the Le Mans region of France and, by 1907, had created the Rhineland chicken as we know it today. It was introduced at a show that year in Berlin and, such was its impact, that a society dedicated to supporting the breed was established a year later.

Nowadays, the Rhineland is available in eight standardised colours; black, white, partridge, silver, blue-speckled, Columbian, blue-grey and blue-partridge. Black remains the most popular colour in Germany, and with Markus too. However, earlier this year he set about hatching both white and partridge examples, and has plans to add additional colours next spring.

Hatching success



Young partridge and white females. Markus has hatched both colours this year.

“I bought my first incubator last spring; in the past I’ve always hatched chicks using a broody hen, so the incubator was an interesting experience. I sourced the hatching eggs from Germany, and got good results in both colours. But, due to space restrictions, I limited myself to just three of each colour, and my surplus birds went to a local poultry specialist, where they still are today.

“Another real benefit of the breed is the fact that it’s so straightforward to keep. These birds are great foragers and don’t require any special management or conditions. I used to keep Silkies which, in comparison, were very labour-intensive. I love the look of the Rhineland; the blacks especially are superb, with their large, flowing tails and beetle green sheen.

“Perhaps the only slight downside is that the Rhineland chicken is never likely to become as tame as an Orpington or an Australorp. These birds just aren’t as docile as many of the large fowl favourites. I find it impossible to catch one if they’re outside the hen house. The white and the partridge still retain a definite wild streak that keeps them wary and slightly timid. Thankfully, though, this isn’t a terribly significant aspect for me as I’m keeping the breed more for what it is. The conservation side of things is the all-important aspect. I’m very keen to do all I can to help ensure the continued survival of this genuinely useful breed, and it’s growth in popularity here in the UK.

“I hatched some bantams back in Germany a few years ago and these were even more flighty; they were off almost the instant they broke out of their shells. Those birds wouldn’t ever roost in the house, preferring a high perch in nearby trees instead. In the end, I moved them on because they simply weren’t much fun to be around. However, I don’t believe it’s so important to keep the bantams; it’s the large fowl which really need the care and attention, so that’s where my efforts will continue to be directed.”

Markus is on a mission to promote this appealing breed here in the UK. He’s convinced he can attract more keepers to this capable chicken and, from what I’ve seen, I tend to agree with him. The cockerels grow to a decent size and apparently make good table birds, while the hens can be relied upon to produce around 220, decent-sized eggs a year.

So, quite apart from the overall attractiveness of the breed, I can see the Rhineland finding its way on to the wishlists of many keepers and smallholders with utility performance, durability and ease of ownership on their minds.

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