

# About Silkie Chickens:

## History:

Chinese Silkies are believed to have originated in Asia, although despite the name, it is unclear whether it was in China, Japan or India. Amongst his many other exploits, Marco Polo is believed to have introduced this bird to the western world sometime between 1254 and 1324.

## Appearance:

It only takes one look at this chicken to see how it got its name. This soft, hairy-feathered fowl looks unlike most other poultry. The Silkie's feathers lack barbs which would otherwise hold the strands together, thus the individual strands sit free of each other. Each of these strands are approximately 50mm to 75mm long and give the bird a soft and, well, silky appearance.

The Chinese Silkie is available in two types, bearded and non-bearded, and differences are also apparent between males (cocks) and females (hens).

Non-bearded silkies have large wattles (a fleshy appendage) about 25mm-40mm long below the beak. However the hen's wattles are much smaller than the cock's. Bearded Silkies, both male and female, have very small wattles (around 5mm long) and as the name suggests, a full, fluffy beard puffs up around the face.

Both bearded and non-bearded Silkies have a feathery crest, like a powder puff, and a fleshy comb on top of the head. The cock's comb is much, much larger than the hens. However the comb doesn't look like what you might see on other types of fowl. A Silkie's comb (called a rose or cushion comb) resembles a wart-like lump on the bird's forehead (see pic) rather than the spiky appendage one would normally imagine. Striking blue coloured lobes also adorn the ears. Silkies differ from other fowls in that they have dark flesh and five toes.

Standard Silkies are mid-sized chickens and weigh around 1.5kg to 2kg. Cocks are larger than hens. Smaller varieties of chicken (called bantams) like the Pekin bantam can weigh as little as 500g whilst larger birds such as the Dorking may weigh around 6kg. In addition to the standard Silkie, breeders have developed the bantam Silkie, which was shown in Australia for the first time at the Sydney Royal Easter Show 2000.

## Temperament:

Silkies are one of the most compliant and docile animals ever born and despite their soft delicate appearance are reasonably robust. The birds can be tamed and are often regarded by their owners as a real pet. Combine this with their curious, delicate appearance and one can see why this bird is often an appealing choice for the novice or child.

## Health and lifespan:

The warmer seasons usually bring with them a greater incidence of lice infestation. Broody hens (those sitting on eggs) will become most susceptible due to the bird's propensity to remain with the brood and not preen or bath itself. All birds should be checked regularly for lice and should have access to a dust bath. Silkies, their pens and nest boxes can be treated for lice each month during the warmer seasons and every two months during the cooler seasons with a proprietary de-lousing product such as Coopex® powder or solution. Scaly leg, caused by a mite which burrows under the skin, is best treated with an appropriate worming product. Fowls can be wormed every three months. Silkies have an average lifespan of 8 to 9 years.

## Grooming and maintenance:

Silkies don't require much extra care compared to other varieties of fowl. It is not uncommon for breeders to trim the 'undercarriage' of their broody hens as knotted feather strands can strangle chicks. Regular trimming of the nails is recommended; use strong scissors and file the nails smooth, as often as necessary.

Silkies are not a difficult breed to look after as pets though they are a popular exhibit bird and as with all exhibited animals preparation for showing involves extra effort. Prior to showing, exhibitors can spend considerable time washing and grooming their birds. Silkies are often washed in three different solutions prior to being either towel dried and left in the sun or blow dried. The feet are then brushed with an old toothbrush and the nails cleaned with a small nail file. Vaseline or baby oil is then rubbed into the skin on the feet and comb for a final clean and polish up.

### **Feeding:**

Most pelleted food is too coarse for these small fowl. Silkies should be fed on chick starter or chick grower, depending on their age. These products are available in most produce stores. Greens (grasses) are essential and if the fowl cannot run on grass, acceptable alternatives include cabbage or a little lettuce.

### **Breeding and cost:**

Unlike some crossbred pullets, Silkies are not repeat layers and will stop laying through winter. Breeders say to expect an average of 90 to 120 eggs per year. Silkie hens are good mums and are often bred with other varieties of fowl due to their strong brooding instincts. Silkie enthusiasts claim some game bird breeders will also often look to buy Silkie hens to foster game chickens. A Silkie hen will comfortably raise 6 to 8 chicks. Silkies cost from around \$20 to \$120 per bird; it's best to buy them from a breeder. If just starting out, breeders recommend buying Silkies in pairs or in threes.

### **Space and exercise:**

Allow 2 to 3 square metres of coop space per pair. The Silkie's feather structure prevents the bird from being able to fly, so perches and nesting boxes should be low and easy to reach. The fowls can be housed on bare earth although shavings and deep litter is preferable to prevent damage to the feathers from rough, muddy conditions. Care should be taken that the Silkies don't fall into backyard pools and spas. The water easily weighs down the plumage and the bird may drown. Be mindful that predators such as dogs, cats and foxes would also find these birds easy targets.

### **Recommended for:**

Silkies make excellent backyard and pet fowl. They are reasonably quiet (though check with local council regulations governing the keeping of poultry in your area) and a couple of hens can be kept without the need for a rooster. While not prolific layers, 6 to 8 hens are adequate for a small family although the eggs are small, around 40 grams. If you had a desire to eat a Silkie, you would find the meat to be quite edible, although many people dislike it due to the dark colour.

Silkies are an ideal bird to introduce the novice and child to poultry keeping and pet care. They are suitable for children aged from around 6 years, though don't let the kids chase the birds around too much, it stresses the chooks and they can be easily hurt if trodden on.