

Cream Legbar Importation to the USA



Before delving into the details of the importation of this breed, it may be helpful to understand a little about the importation process.

Each country has different regulations for the export and import of chickens. In the United States, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) controls the process. In the United Kingdom, the export of chickens is controlled by the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The USDA import process, while expensive, is relatively simple to negotiate. DEFRA, on the other hand, is known for its thicket of regulations that expose flock owners to the destruction of their flocks if, after testing, birds are determined to harbor certain diseases. So, it is very difficult to get British flock owners to submit to the DEFRA process knowing that the outcome is potentially disastrous.

The lengthy and complex import process requires cooperation from legbar breeders in the UK. Here's an important point: It is not as simple as finding the best legbar stock and then paying for a few eggs. The legbar breeders need to be willing to cooperate in exporting the eggs to other European countries, and not all breeders are willing to deal with the extra effort required to export. So, when people point to pictures of perfect champion UK legbars on the internet and ask why didn't we import stock from that breeder, the probable answer is that the breeder had no interest in cooperating with us. Our farm is like any other enterprise: You do the best you can with the resources available.

The first shipment of cream legbars we received consisted of eight young adults; one rooster and four hens from one flock and a trio from another flock. These birds arrived in the US on September 23, 2010. Eggs from two different legbar breeders in the UK had been flown to, and hatched in a different country. We had found these breeders by doing research on the internet.

Within a few weeks we began to see symptoms of Marek's disease in some of these newly imported legbars. The birds had not been vaccinated for Marek's in Europe, and it became obvious that there was a strain of Marek's in the US to which they were vulnerable. We had not seen symptoms of Marek's in our own birds on our farm, but Marek's is omnipresent in the Southeast, and our flocks had built up an immunity over time.

Incidentally, we have now imported more than thirty breeds and varieties of chickens, and it became evident that importing birds from these remote areas of the world introduced these birds to a whole new range of diseases that they had never encountered. It's much like when the first Europeans encountered Native Americans and promptly killed about 90% of the human population of North America because of communicable diseases. Some of these European chickens had little resistance to some American poultry diseases. For example, we found that the hedemora from the Northern Sweden were very vulnerable to Marek's while Swedish flower hens from southern Sweden were very resistant.

When the Marek's finished burning through the original eight cream legbars we were left with a trio from the original five birds and one rooster from the original trio. The good news was that the surviving birds were Marek's resistant, highly fertile, and generally healthy.

We bred the one rooster and hens from the trio and produced healthy young. These birds produced what we called our A line. The rooster had the cosmetic defect of a floppy comb, and the hens had smaller crests, but the birds consistently laid blue eggs and lots of them and always produced auto-sexing chicks. The birds also showed quite a bit of chestnut coloring in their feathers. A picture of the rooster and one of the hens is attached.

The female offspring that were produced from these matings were later bred to the unrelated rooster that had survived from the earlier importation. This rooster had an erect comb and proved to be a good breeder. A picture of this rooster, the B rooster, is attached.

In June of 2011 I had the opportunity to go to the UK and look at some legbar stock there. This gave me a better sense of the breed, although the birds we had already imported looked as good as many of the birds I saw in the UK on that trip. See the attached pic from the Domestic Fowl Trust.

Also that same summer, to correct some of these cosmetic deficiencies, we located another group of unrelated cream legbar stock in the UK that showed an erect comb, a lighter gray color, and a much more prominent feather crest. We selected the best of the four males and two of the best females.

A trio of the chosen birds arrived in America on October 4, 2011. These birds were bred to form our C line. Also, it's noteworthy that this time we had the birds vaccinated for Marek's before shipment.

On March 9, 2011, another importer brought in 115 chickens from the UK to America, and this shipment included a number of cream legbars. These birds were later destroyed at the New York USDA quarantine facility when testing revealed they had avian influenza. To the best of my knowledge this represents the only direct shipment of chickens from the UK to the US in the last decade, and it failed.

In December of 2012 I again traveled to the UK and met Jill Rees who is currently winning with legbars in some of Britain's most prominent poultry shows. She was very open and knowledgeable, and we arranged to import some of her championship line. Jill selected two pairs of her best birds from her 2013 hatch, and we imported these birds on September 3, 2013. By the time they cleared quarantine and arrived at our farm they were laying. (One hen actually laid an egg in the shipping crate.) We have been getting both blue and green eggs from Jill's birds, and the birds appear to be very healthy and calm.

There have been a number of people who have claimed to have imported cream legbars, but I have reviewed the relevant USDA import permits and do not see any proof of legal importation. I have read a few online accounts of people who have somehow gotten unrelated legbars, but then later I've also seen a description of symptoms in these birds that make me think they died of Marek's when they were juveniles.

So, to the best of my knowledge Greenfire Farms is currently the only legal importer of this breed. As for the future, we intend to keep working with Jill as she refines her flock in the UK, and hopefully we can import other Rees legbars as her line develops.