

Rare Chickens Are Bred For Fishermen

A Canadian family farm that raises cattle and hay has an unusual sideline business raising rare chickens bred strictly for their special feathers, which are used in the fly-tying trade.

According to John Howard, there are only 15 to 20 "hackle" farms in the world, so it's a business that's extremely specialized.

Feathers become "hackle" when one or more of them are wrapped around a fishing hook to produce a "fly." Dry flies have a "spiky" appearance designed to imitate an insect's legs on the surface of the water, and wet flies will submerge in the water. Fishermen who "tie flies" are craftsmen who use a variety of patterns, feather sizes and colors to achieve the exact effect they want. A wide selection of flies is needed to target many different fish species under a variety of conditions.

Near Didsbury, Alberta, John and Bonny Howard and their family are only one hour from one of North America's top fly fishing spots, the Bow River. Also, the climate where they live enhances the quality of the feathers their chickens produce.

"We are the world's most northern hackle producer and the only one in Canada. Our temperatures range from 80 F in the summer to lows of -45 F in the winter. This cold, harsh climate leads to enhanced feather quality as the birds adapt. They grow more feathers and have an increased barb count," Howard says.

Of course, genetics play a big part, too. When making breeding decisions, the Howard family's aim is to produce the maximum number of feathers which are longer, narrower and more uniform than regular chicken feathers. The flexibility of the stem (quill or shaft) is crucial, so hackle breeders genetically select for the ideal shaped stem.

"We started raising hackle in 1991 and bought out a U.S. breeder, so our flock of 800 birds has over 60 years of hackle genetics behind it," John says, "The quality of our birds has steadily improved."

Hackle chickens are very rare and breeding stock is simply not available unless a breeder retires or sells out, according to Howard.

"These birds are extremely pampered. They get the best of feed and housing and a lot of care is required. Cleanliness is critical," he says.

Capes (necks) and saddles (backs) are the two areas of the chicken that produces top quality hackle, so this is how the processed birds are marketed. Roosters are harvested more than hens, due to the superior quality hackle they produce.

Depending on the graded quality, "natural necks" sell for between \$45 and \$77 (Can.), and "natural saddles" are \$25 to \$45 (Can.) each. Dyed necks are priced at \$69 (Can.), and dyed saddles are \$42 (Can.) each. Howard Hackle also offers "Beginner Packs" containing a selection of "half neck" colors for \$59 to \$64 (Can.) each. Shipping and



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handling is \$3 for 1 to 3 pieces in Canada and the U.S.

"Our customers include individual fishermen who tie their own flies, factories and fishing supply stores," Howard explains. "We get orders from around the world, including Germany, Sweden, Italy, Thailand, Finland, Australia, the U.S. and here at home."

Orders can be placed by calling Howard

Hackle between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. Mountain Standard Time.

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Dairy Plant On Wheels

A Wisconsin dairy equipment manufacturer who started making portable "Cheese On Wheels" cheese plants several years ago recently started making tractor-mounted portable dairies for bottling milk and making other dairy products.

"We've had a lot of interest in our bottling plant," says Torry Thuli, Darlington Dairy Supply (DDS). "A lot of people are thinking about bottling milk to add value to their dairy business. Not everyone can make cheese, which takes a lot more training." DDS does the needed planning, design and testing to meet regulatory requirements and guarantees the process works. The base unit is a 53-ft. trailer outfitted with all needed processing, packaging and cleaning systems.

If designed as a fluid milk plant, the trailer can process 1,000 gal. of raw milk into bottles in about 12 hours. It contains a separator/clarifier, two 350-gal. pasteurizers, filler, capper and pumps, and cleaning equipment.

The mobile plant only requires normal utility hook up. It comes complete with LP or natural gas hookups, water, sewer and electrical connections. It runs on 120 amps of 220V single phase, 60 cycle electricity and has a boiler, chiller and industrial water heater, all installed to code. A walk-in cooler can store multiple days' production.

"Options include yogurt, ice cream or butter processing equipment," says Thuli.

The milk processing plant is priced at \$350,000. Cheese plant designs are priced at \$275,000.



Mobile milk bottling plant consists of a 53-ft. trailer outfitted with processing, packaging and cleaning systems.

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They're Adding Value to Waste Wool

Two Oregon sheep producers have come up with a new way to use low quality wool for house insulation. Their machine chops up the wool so it can be blown into place. The chopped wool can also be blown into pet pads and other products they have developed, but insulation offers the biggest market yet.

"It's an all natural and sustainable product," says Joel Pynch, a Halsey, Oregon sheep producer. "We expect to charge around \$2.50/sq. ft. with depth for an R19 value. Roving or batt wool insulation is now being sold in Canada for \$6.50/lb."

That's not bad for poor quality wool that currently often goes to the landfill, says Pynch. Wool is ideal as a natural insulation. It has to reach 800 degrees before it burns, and it has a natural pest and rodent resistance. It also pulls out moisture, holding 30 percent of its weight and preventing the formation of molds and fungi. These qualities are all enhanced by a boric acid wash that leaves borate crystals adhered to

the fibers. It also has excellent sound insulation qualities, much better than other forms of insulation.

Pynch and fellow Oregon sheep producer Margaret Magruder formed Oregon Shepherd to find new uses for the wool. Magruder is also president of the American Lamb Board.

For the past six years, they've been searching for alternative markets for their wool. Changing preferences for wool has lowered the demand for much of the wool produced in the Pacific Northwest. Decreasing quality due to increased use of hair-type sheep and colored wool sheep has further lowered demand. The hair type and colored wool has to be separated from the higher quality wool by hand, as neither can take a dye. Rather than spend the money, the mixed quality wool often gets thrown out. That drives down income and encourages producers out of the business.

Pynch and Magruder knew they had to find ways to add value to wool to stop the industry decline. Initial products included sleep-

ing pads for pets, survival blankets, a moisture fire retardant blanket, slip-on covers for dirty boots and shoes, felt blankets for use around seedlings to keep down weeds and pests, and stadium pillows. In trials, the seedling blankets even appear to repel beavers from tree seedlings.

"These products were a trickle but we needed a major market," explains Pynch.

They knew that wool bat insulation was being used in New Zealand and Australia and has been accepted in Europe. Working with a group of retired volunteer executives, they did a market survey. Positive results in hand, they plan to start production soon.

"We chop the wool into short lengths to reduce it to a flowable product," says Pynch. "Once we could get it in blown form, we knew we could form it most anyway we wanted."

Although the wool insulation will cost more than some alternatives, Pynch believes the added value and natural content will attract customers.



Low quality wool can be turned into house insulation, says Joel Pynch.

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