



Coming Home
to
Roost

Charming and social,
these underappreciated
birds deserve the good life

by CARRIE ALLAN

Mindy Gilbert's arrival home from business trips is always cause for so much fanfare that she can hardly get a word in edgewise at the pet sitter's house.

"Bob and Stella run up, and they're so happy to see me," says Gilbert, Alabama state director for The HSUS. "They talk and talk in the front seat on the way home."

That kind of animal affection won't surprise most pet owners, but the species of Gilbert's little friends might: They're chickens. While they spend their days scratching in the yard, they come inside at night. And their charming personalities have made Gilbert quite an advocate for the birds.

"Honestly, I regret that I did not come to appreciate chickens earlier in life, because they are so funny and social," she says.

Not only do they bond with humans, but many are bedecked with streaming, billowy plumage and brilliant combs and wattles. "Some of these fancy birds, you look at them and go, 'Are they chickens or poodles?'" says Gilbert, laughing.

Gilbert is one of many animal lovers who are discovering that fowl are fair, keeping chickens either as companions or as a way to avoid eating eggs that come from factory farms. People who don't want to support the inhumane, polluting practices of industrial agribusiness have opted to reduce the number of eggs in their diets, replace eggs with other foods, or refine their supply by looking for kinder, gentler producers at local farmers' markets.

Some have even gone a step further to become the master of their own omelets, deciding there's no place more local than their own backyard.

THE CHICKEN AND THE EGGS

For many, chicken-keeping has become a passion. They get the charming companionship of chickens as they collect the eggs; they keep their birds cozy and safe and treat them as beloved pets. "They're good company," says David Nard, a chef who began keeping hens in his Maryland backyard three years ago to provide a healthy alternative to eggs from factory farms. "If you're working in the garden or sitting on the porch, they'll come hang out with you."

But as Nard and his partner, Jeni Caron, know well, caring for the birds requires a serious commitment. At the end of each work day, they "run home to let the girls out so they can get some greens" in the lush backyard. If Nard and Caron go away for the weekend, they need to find a chicken-sitter. And the enclosure they've built is, as Nard describes it, the "Fort Knox" of chicken houses, fortified with double-layered wiring and topped with netting to protect the birds from predators at night.

Neophytes who aren't prepared for these realities of chicken keeping can quickly find themselves overwhelmed—and in some communities, their lack of preparation has created a burden on local animal shelters, sanctuaries, and rescue groups. It's the dark side of a mostly positive trend. "Locavores"—the 2007 word of the year for the *Oxford American Dictionary*—are people who try to eat foods grown nearby, thus reducing the carbon footprint created by long-haul shipping of meats and produce. Their commitment to knowing

as much as possible about where their food comes from—Is it organic? Humanely raised? Produced by laborers who aren't exploited?—has had a positive effect on food trends overall. But, says Richard Farinato, senior director of The HSUS's Captive Wildlife and Sanctuaries section, there are some exceptions.

"As much as we love the idea of eating locally and eating organic and eating green, and knowing where your food comes from and how the animal has been treated," he says, "locavores who decide they're going to put a box in the backyard with a wire window in it and keep chickens are not exactly fulfilling a humane mission."

At The HSUS's SPCA Wildlife Care Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., "we have chickens out the wazoo," says Farinato. The birds come in for a number of reasons: Some are picked up running loose on the street by animal control or the public, some are given up by people who had them in the backyard and no longer want them, some are hens rescued during cockfighting raids. Others are unwanted Easter chicks, all grown up.

In the care of the center, chickens prosper. Farinato refers to their newly refurbished pens and exercise space as "Chicken Palace." But the neglect, mistreatment, and stress that precede their arrival is a shame for the animals.

FOWL TREATMENT

Chickens, after all, have enough to cope with. About 9 billion are slaughtered for meat each year in the U.S. While the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act requires that livestock be rendered insensible to pain first, the USDA does not consider birds to be livestock, interpreting the law in a way that excludes them from such protections. Many are shackled and electrocuted while fully conscious.

Beyond those birds kept for meat, another 280 million are kept as laying hens, about 95 percent of them in battery cages that afford each chicken a space no larger than a sheet of copy paper. And that's information not from animal activists, but from reports by the USDA and the United Egg Producers, a trade association that represents the majority of U.S. egg farmers.

Those who want to buck this system and give these birds a better life will be enriched by the experience, say humane keepers like Marilee Geyer, who keeps a flock of more than 50 rescued chickens in California. Elsa and Betty, abandoned in a backyard and rescued by an animal shelter, are now "as playful and silly as kittens," investigating their surroundings and jumping into empty boxes, says Geyer. Wilhelmina, a former resident of a factory farm with caged hens, has blossomed from a shy bird who didn't even know the feeling of solid ground under her feet to a companion who runs toward Geyer whenever she sees her. "She began following me around the backyard, watching for bugs as I worked in the garden," says Geyer. "Eventually she would sit next to me, and then she started hopping up on my lap."



Chicken Check-In: DID YOU KNOW?

Jungle Birdie

The chicken you picture pecking her way around the yard? She'd be more at home in the jungle. That's right: The birds we know as icons of domesticity have roots in exotic Thailand, where even now, the jungle fowl from whom domestic chickens descended rule the verdant roost, cockadoodling from the thick jungle canopy to greet the day before flying down to scratch around in the undergrowth.

Glamour Boys

Like domestic roosters—and most birds, for that matter—male jungle fowl are more spectacular than their lady friends. Their plumage is a spectrum of iridescent blacks, coppers, and greens. Their fancy feathers help them serve as a distraction for hungry predators. When a “bad guy” appears, Flashy Dad zips across the terrain to draw interest, while plain Mom hides in the nest and protects the babies-in-waiting. Her protectiveness continues after her eggs hatch; she'll gather her babies under her wings to shelter them if a hawk happens to swing by overhead.

Chick Cliques

They may all look alike to our untrained eyes, but chickens have no problem telling each other apart. They're able to recognize at least 100 fellow cluckers, and they'll seek the company of those they know. They can tell humans apart, too: Researchers at the University of Guelph found that chickens recognized people who had repeatedly withheld food, turning away from them in search of more generous bipeds.

The Way to a Hen's Heart?

Much like human males on the prowl, roosters do all sorts of things to catch a sexy hen's eye. They perform elaborate dances—heads bobbing, feathers fluffed, and wings extended—as they shuffle sideways in an avian “Hammer Dance.” They'll also pick up pieces of food and drop them near the hen to get her attention.

Jurassic Beak

Last year, scientists at Harvard and the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Cambridge, Mass., analyzed the collagen in the bone of a Tyrannosaurus rex and found that it was more like that found in the bones of modern birds—especially chickens and ostriches—than the bone collagen of modern reptiles. Having chickens in your backyard is as close as you'll ever get to minding your own flock of mini-T. rexes.



Jeni Caron comforts Blondie, who has been known to tap on people's legs when she wants to be held.

At Nard's house, chickens truly rule the roost, gathering on the deck for tidbits when they see their human friends eating breakfast inside and crowing to let the world know they've laid their eggs. Blondie, who is low in the pecking order, even taps on Nard's leg when she wants to be held, while Dottie indulges her musical preferences by sitting with him when he plays the guitar. Known as the “guardian” of the flock, Dottie recently kept a squawking watch from a rafter when some human visitors in-

vaded her space. “She's lecturing you,” Caron said.

Though worth the rewards, chickens are like any other pet: they require an investment of time and money. While the old riddle about the arrival of chickens versus eggs may be eternal, adopters should have no doubt: The birds must come first.

Chickens can be noisy, and if you don't keep them healthy and their space clean, they can attract lice and other pests. Chicken adopters also need to be vigilant about the eggs their animals produce. If there's a rooster around, the eggs may be fertile and must be gathered and refrigerated quickly to avoid new hatchings.

Those who plan to adopt and care for a flock should be prepared for the expense of setting up a predator-safe environment. Mary Britton Clouse, head of Chicken Run Rescue in Minneapolis, estimates the startup costs for good chicken housing at about \$4,000; that doesn't include the cost of care for each bird, which she puts at around \$280 a year.

Many urban and suburban areas also have zoning restrictions for the keeping of poultry. These rules may specify how close the birds can be to a residence and how much space is required per animal; in some areas, chicken keeping is illegal or requires a permit. To help crack down on illegal cock-



Complete with skylights, perches, rafters, ramps, and “Italian furniture”—as Nard describes the wine crates he converted into nesting boxes—this chicken abode is a cozy but safe space for Dottie (top), Maybelline (lower left), and the rest of their friends.

David Nard shuns factory farm products and cooks with eggs from his pet hens, who have the run of his chemical-free backyard when he's home. "None of this is new," says Nard's partner and fellow chicken keeper, Jeni Caron. "This is how my grandparents lived. It's just something that people have gotten away from for a couple of generations."



fighting, the Los Angeles City Council is considering an ordinance to limit personal possession to one chicken per household.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Adopted chickens may behave oddly when they arrive at their new homes. Those rescued from factory farms have led traumatic lives of confinement. Psychologically, they're much like dogs raised in puppy mills. They've never known what it is to

walk on grass or take comfort in the arms of a human.

But according to most chicken rescue experts, many neurotic and aggressive behaviors are likely to disappear as the animals become accustomed to a setting where they have space, comfort, and positive interactions with people and with each other.

When rescued chickens arrive at the Marin Humane Society in Novato, Calif., "they tend to flock and stay in a huddled

circle in the corner," says Kim Lanham-Snyder, the shelter's director of special programs and projects. "Anything they've experienced with humans has so far been negative, so they try not to interact. They've never had anything to perch on, so they don't even know to get up on a perch and hold their feet around it."

As the chickens get their bearings and begin to enjoy their new homes, adopters may find their own perspectives about these creatures permanently altered. So much of the way we categorize animals—these for food, these for companionship, these for work—is cultural, a system handed down to us through longstanding traditions. But many people who've brought chickens into their lives find they're no longer limited by preconceived notions about the species.

"There are a lot of people who get it," says Clouse. "They read the personality profiles on our Petfinder page and they suddenly understand, 'My gosh, these are complex creatures! These birds have personalities and they're individuals.' All it takes is for someone to give them permission to think differently, so once they understand that there are people who care and advocate for chickens and respect their instincts and behaviors in all of their complexity—the 'dumb animal' that everyone thinks about? [The] 'it's just a chicken' [sentiment]? All of that falls away." ■

Thinking about getting chickens?

- ▶ **ADOPT, DON'T BUY!** The chicks sold by feed stores and mail order catalogs may come cheap, but there are hidden costs: The sales support the poultry industry, and chicks sent through the mail often die en route. Animal shelters and farm sanctuaries have lots of chickens in need of good homes, so check *Petfinder.com* for adoptable birds.
- ▶ **BUY THE COOP (OR BUILD IT):** Chickens need a safe place to hang out and sleep. That means investing in a secure coop and exercise area that protects them from the elements and from predators.
- ▶ **GIVE THEM SOME SPACE:** If you are interested in adopting more than one rooster, read up on flock dynamics first. Some roosters can become aggressive with each other if there aren't enough hens to make each feel he has his own brood. It's a natural part of their social structure, and adopters who take the time to train and get to know a rooster will often find a friendly and social bird underneath the macho behavior. But their hierarchy and housing are important to pay attention to, for the sake of the chickens.
- ▶ **READ SOME GOOD "CHICK LIT."** Several chicken rescue groups, including Chicken Run in Minnesota and United Poultry Concerns in Virginia, have care guidelines that will help you learn what these funny, complex little birds need. Make sure your own "rescue" is providing them with a better life.

