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[ABOUT US](#)
[BACK ISSUES](#)
[EVENTS](#)
[INTERVIEWS](#)
[LINKS](#)
[SEARCH](#)
[THIS MONTH](#)

It's a Hard-Cluck Life The Satya Interview with Pattrice Jones



Pattrice Jones and friends having a spaghetti party.

Photo courtesy of Eastern Shore Sanctuary

Pattrice Jones cares for chickens and ducks at the Eastern Shore Sanctuary and Education Center in rural Maryland. Located on the Delmarva Peninsula, where the poultry industry kills more than a million chickens every day, the Eastern Shore Sanctuary is a place of safety situated amidst factory farms and rural poverty and provides a haven for hens and roosters who have escaped or have been rescued from the poultry and egg industries.

Anyone who has witnessed her dynamic appearances at conferences or read her regular articles in the pages of *Satya* would know that Pattrice is also one of the most original thinkers in the animal movement. **Pattrice Jones** recently found time to talk with **Kymberlie Adams Matthews** about living with chickens and gives us a glimpse of her funny bone.

Tell us a chicken joke.

Why do hens lay eggs?

Why?

If they dropped them, they'd break.

That's not very funny.

Fine. You try.

Why did the chicken cross the road only half way?

Why?

Because she wanted to lay it on the line!

Good one!

Tell us what it's like to run a chicken sanctuary.

You know the song, "joy and pain, sunshine and rain?" That's it exactly. Gladness and grief in equal measures. All of the giddy grittiness of the cycle of life. And, speaking of songs, you are required to sing silly ones. And I make up songs, too, usually in the form of 12-bar blues. Everybody I know who takes in chickens ends up singing to them. Some of the most serious people in the movement sing songs to chickens.

How do the chickens react?

They like it. If I'm singing to pass the time as I'm cleaning coops, there usually will be a group of hens hanging around listening. Sometimes, if I get the tone and the tune just right, some of them sing along. That's always very touching to me because one of the things I love most about chickens is how they sing to each other at night as they're drifting off to sleep. When they sing back to me, I feel included in their social world.

What about you? You rescued a lot of chickens recently. They were crowded into crates stacked in the rain in Brooklyn. Now they're all at sanctuaries. So you tell me: What do you like most about chickens?

I really love the way they purr...that chickens purr.

I like that too. Also, I love how their toes look just like our fingers. That proves we're related!

I've seen your place. It's very weedy. You use a broken-down Buick as a feed shed! Are you some kind of freegan?

Our sanctuary is for birds, not for people. Since we don't give tours, we can concentrate on what's good for the birds without worrying about what looks pretty to people. Birds like the wild plants that people call weeds. And, yes, we are as freegan as possible. Reusing and recycling saves money and is good for the environment. Other than feed, bedding and medical supplies, we don't buy anything new unless we absolutely have to. As far as I'm concerned, if it's not green, it's not vegan.

All jokes aside, I thought your sanctuary was incredibly real and homey. I loved seeing the hens and roosters up in the trees.

Thank you! You've been rescuing animals much longer than I have, so that means a lot to me. Let me ask you: How do you keep going without burning out or giving up?

Beer. And you?

I seize the day. I squeeze every drop of happiness I can get out of any good thing. I learned that from the birds, from the former egg factory inmates in particular. Every morning, they swoop out of the coop eager to see what the new day brings. Maybe there'll be a new mud puddle in the middle of the yard! Or maybe some interesting insects out in the woods! They don't let yesterday's sorrows hold them back.

Me, I try to follow their lead. So I am always stopping to stare at flowers and trying to get as much blue sky as possible into my eyes. My morning chores take much longer than they should because I am forever stopping to play with a barn cat or pick up a pretty rock.

The barn cats...they get along with the chickens?

Yes! Some of them even sleep in the coops at night. On cold, wet days, you can often see chickens and cats all huddled together in the wood shed, sharing body heat as they wait out the rain. That's another thing that makes me happy. Any time I see different species cooperating, I have to stop and soak up the pacific energy. Maybe it sounds crazy, but I feel like, somewhere in our souls, all of us can remember the days when people knew how to cooperate too. Living here on the Delmarva Peninsula, with death and despoliation all around, I really need to hang onto that memory.

Tell me about Delmarva. Home of Frank Perdue...over a million chickens killed every day at dozens of slaughterhouses...more than 750,000 tons of manure a year...

It's a region of breathtaking beauty and cut-throat cruelty, so I walk around with mixed feelings every day. If I'm out for a stroll with the dogs along a wooded roadside, we might see wild turkeys or we might see hunters in combat fatigues. If I decide to relax with a bike ride after my morning chores, I might see a field full of vultures stretching their wings to catch the most of the winter sun. Or, if it's springtime, I might see purple flowers rampaging over the same field. But, whatever the season, I can't ride for 10 minutes in any direction without seeing sheds in which tens of thousands of young chickens spend their short lives, never seeing the sun or breathing the fresh air that catches in my lungs as I glide by.

This is the region where factory farming of chickens was invented. Here we see more clearly than anywhere how the exploitation of animals poisons everything. Sterile soil, polluted wells, dropping water tables, a growing dead zone in the center of the Chesapeake Bay—these are just some of the environmental evils that decades of factory farming have visited on what was once known as “the breadbasket of the American Revolution.”

The pain in this region goes so deep. This was a slave state. Now white men own the chicken houses while black women do the dangerous and demoralizing work of reducing birds to their body parts at the slaughter plants. African American and Latino men work as “chicken catchers,” often in debt servitude to the crew chiefs who sell their labor to the poultry industry.

But I try to remember that Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman lived in this region too. And, every once in awhile, I can glimpse even further back. We're on the migration path of lots of birds. Some days, thousands of birds suddenly descend on the trees in and around the sanctuary. They make so much noise that they drown out the roosters! My heart seems to beat with their wings. At such moments, my body can almost remember the days when this region was all forest and the skies were black with passenger pigeons. I am so sad about the demise of such days. And yet, seeing so many birds so wild and so free offers me a moment of hope.

I know you believe that there is a vital connection between the exploitation of animals, women, and the environment. Can you talk about your other activisms?

I've been a tenant organizer, an anti-racist educator, and even spent a day as the bodyguard of an Arab American peace activist during the first war on Iraq. I've staged rent strikes, kiss-ins, boycotts, and a needle-exchange program. I favor direct action and specialize in putting together unlikely coalitions, the most recent of which is the Global Hunger Alliance.

I went to my first gay rights rally at 15, which was the same year I quit eating meat. Back then, in the late 70s, it was cool to be vegetarian but lesbians were still looked upon as over-sexed perverts. Now it's cool to be queer and vegetarians are seen as pleasure-hating prudes. Back then, gay liberationists were condemned for taking time away from real problems like poverty or racism and now, of course, it's animal liberationists who are the targets of such criticism.

Feminists like Adrienne Rich and the late Audre Lorde have since helped us to understand how homophobia is related to racism and sexism. It's up to us to take the next step, to help everybody understand that human and animal liberation are not separate projects. That's why I love *Satya*: every month you bring it all together.

We try. So, what is the hardest thing you have ever done for the animals?

Running the sanctuary. Because of the grief.

Tell me about losing a chicken...

I'm remembering a little bird, just a goofy young rooster, eager for attention. I was very sad one day and was ducked down in the yard, momentarily immobilized by despair, when this little bird—new, it was his first day—just jumped up onto my shoulder. “Yes,” I said out loud, “I do need a friend right now.”

I started calling him Heartbeat and he was my little friend. Whenever I would go into the yard, I would say, “Where's my friend? Where's my little Heartbeat?” and he would come running to be picked up and carried around.

When Heartbeat had been with us only a week or two, a young hen came in very banged up and shook up from her fall from a poultry transport truck. She wasn't so seriously injured that she needed to be in the infirmary, but she needed a friend. I wondered what to do. Then I knew. I carried the battered young hen into the yard and called, “Heartbeat, Heartbeat! Where's my little friend?” He came running as I set the hen on the ground.

Heartbeat slowly circled the little bird, pausing to look intently at each scrape and bruise. Then he stood very still, seeming to not know what to do. After a long moment, he gently lowered himself to the ground, making the sound that mother hens make when they soothe their chicks. The young hen, who had been standing as if petrified, relaxed and laid herself down beside him. They rested there together, two young birds drawing comfort from one another in the middle of a big and brutal world.

Like most “broiler” chickens, Heartbeat died too young. The chickens bred by the poultry industry have a host of health problems due to decades of genetic selection for rapid growth combined with the

unwholesome environment in which the birds spend their first weeks.

On what would be his last morning, Heartbeat was very still and weak but seemed to appreciate the soymilk-alfalfa-vitamin concoction I fed him by hand. But then it started dribbling out of his mouth and I knew. I carried him to a quiet spot, holding his body to my heart and his drooping head in my hand.

I held his little body as he went into his death throes. First I said, “No, don’t go, don’t go,” but then I said, “Go, go with the wild birds,” and, “You’ll never be alone.”

He went with his eyes open. For a while after he died I thought he was still alive because his little chest still seemed to be moving up and down. But then I realized it was just my own heartbeat.

This is getting depressing. Let’s change the subject—quick!

What’s the funniest thing that ever happened at the sanctuary?

It’s hard to say. You could make a slapstick movie of me repeatedly tripping over fences, falling into puddles and chasing frisky chickens around and around the mulberry tree at bedtime.

The chickens have their own comical moments, although I often hesitate to say so since they are so frequently the object of mockery. Like all young animals, juvenile chickens get into scrapes when their curiosity leads them astray. I remember one day hearing the strangest sounds from the chicken yard. They weren’t alarm cries for a fox or a hawk but something clearly was wrong. Running out, I found a young hen with her head sticking out of one side of a cinderblock and her legs sticking out of the other. Like a child with her head between railings or Winnie-the-Pooh stuck in the entrance to Rabbit’s house, she couldn’t get out of what she had gotten into. Several adults were standing around squawking at her, evidently giving her conflicting advice, since everything they said seemed to make her more confused. The eldest rooster was pacing back and forth, clearly trying to figure out what to do. I felt like the fire department coming to the rescue. She was jammed in there pretty tight but finally I was able to get her to relax enough for me to ease her out backwards.

I know that you and sanctuary co-founder Miriam Jones do all of the work yourselves and often struggle to make ends meet. What can people do to come to your rescue?

I hate to have to say it so plainly but the thing we need most is money. We need, relatively soon, to raise enough money to hire helpers from the local community. That will help us help the birds and also be a step toward our long-term goal of promoting sustainable rural development as an alternative to factory farming—something our movement too often forgets to do. It’s hard to raise money down here, so we need our friends in other places to hold fund-raisers for us where they live. Anybody can hold a vegan potluck, talk about chickens, and pass the hat.

Finally, what’s one thing about chickens you think everyone should know?

Every one of the billions of chickens killed by the poultry industry every year is an individual like Heartbeat, with feelings and unique characteristics. If a juvenile rooster with troubles of his own can find empathy for a stranger, surely we can find enough love in our hearts to do what we need to do for them.

For more information on Eastern Shore Sanctuary contact www.bravebirds.org or (410) 651-4934.

[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)

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