

Rehabilitating Fighting Roosters

an ecofeminist project

by *pattrice jones*

I'm sitting in a low lawn chair, wearing boxer shorts and a t-shirt that says "Feminists for Animal Rights." My legs are streaked with mud and there's a bright yellow patch on one ankle that can only be dried egg yolk. My forearms are dotted with bruises at the centre of each of which is an abrasion. It's hot and sunny. From under the brim of a floppy hat, I've got one eye on a Penguin paperback and the other on a multicolored rooster who might or might not start a fight at any moment. My hat sports the colours of the Brazilian flag but ought to be UN blue because I'm a peacekeeper today. At any moment, I might be forced to place myself between combatants. In the interim, I wait. And wait.

Welcome to exciting yet enervating world of rooster rehabilitation. Here at the Eastern Shore Sanctuary, in Maryland on the East coast of the USA, we help roosters who have formerly been used in cockfighting to live peacefully with other birds. This is both an ecofeminist and abolitionist project.

Illegal in many countries and in most of the United States, cockfighting persists in parts of Asia, on some Pacific Islands, in parts of South and Central America and in the southern United States. In this cruel "sport," roosters are socialised to view other roosters as predators, provoked by injections of testosterone and methamphetamines, armed with steel blades attached to the stumps of their sawed-off spurs, and then matched in bloody battles from which the only escape is death. In between events, they are typically isolated in small cages or tethered to stakes adjacent to A-frame shelters.

Because illegal cockfights are inevitably the site of illegal gambling, authorities are quicker to intervene in cockfighting than in other forms of animal cruelty. Unfortunately, their interventions usually do not aid the true victims of the crime — the roosters. Most often, birds confiscated from cockfighting operations are euthanised.

We are able to rescue and rehabilitate only a handful of the hundreds of former fighting cocks who are confiscated

every year but, to every rooster we are able to save, our offer of sanctuary means everything. Because they are very close genetically to the wild jungle fowl who are the ancestors of modern chickens, many of the former fighters who come here choose a feral lifestyle, sleeping up in the trees and wandering the woods all day. Others move into the coops, joining former egg factory inmates and big "broiler" chickens in a more sedate life. Since we open the coops at sunrise and don't close up until sunset, most still spend almost all day outdoors.

One former fighter, who we call Saturn, spends almost all his time on a perch by a window in the largest coop, interacting with the hens as they lay their eggs. He only goes outside to join his "girlfriends" in sun bathing or dust bathing. That's his choice! The rooster we call Julio is more typical, spending all day every day in his favourite patch of bushes, sometimes interacting with other chickens and sometimes napping in the dappled sunlight.

Why is what we do a feminist project? Because roosters are both the victims and the unwitting agents of human sexism. One of the most damaging aspects of sexism is the confusion between sex (maleness or femaleness) and gender (masculinity or femininity). Some people are more assertive while others are more yielding. Some are brave. Some are nurturing. Sexism assigns these characteristics to genders and then asserts that gender is a natural expression of sex. Thus, girls who are assertive and boys who are nurturing are led to believe that there is something unnatural about them.

Sexist cultures use animals to erase the line between sex and gender. People look to animals for proof that certain kinds of behaviour are typically male or typically female. They always find what they're looking for! Feminist scholars have shown how biased observation of free animals have led scientists to simply not see animal behaviour that is inconsistent with their sexist stereotypes. (The same kinds of bias led scientists to miss or dismiss observations of homosexuality in some 300 species of animals.)

People also force or trick animals into acting out sexist stereotypes and then point to those animals as evidence



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that the stereotypes reflect the natural order. This is nowhere more clear than with fighting cocks. Roosters have long been seen as embodiments of masculinity. That's why many men refer to their penises as "cocks."

Men who participate in cockfighting sometimes call themselves "cockers." Studies of such men in various cultures invariably find that they see "their" roosters as extensions of their masculinity. They feel proud when a rooster behaves unnaturally aggressively (for example, by attacking a fleeing bird) and ashamed when a rooster behaves naturally (for example, by fleeing from danger). They have very strong ideas about what they believe to be the natural behaviour of roosters and are unable to see how their own interventions have created the unnatural behaviour they see. They are very scornful of people like me. Indeed, the most insulting correspondence we receive via our website is inevitably from proponents of cockfighting, who assure us that we are idiots and insist that we cannot possibly have done what numerous neutral observers have verified that we have, in fact, done: Helped former fighters to live peacefully within flocks, as they were naturally meant to do.

In nature, roosters are the sentinels and protectors of the flock. They constantly scan the skies and the horizon for predators while joining the hens in looking for food. In contrast to the myth of male stoicism, roosters tend to be more emotional than hens, probably because they need to be more sensitive to potential threats. There is much overlap between the common characteristics of roosters and hens as well as much variation among roosters. A rooster will risk his life protecting the flock from a predator. A hen will often take the same risk protecting her chicks. Some roosters are very nurturing toward chicks; others ignore them. Some roosters spend all their time with hens. Others prefer the company of other roosters or stay to themselves.

Neither wild jungle fowl nor feral roosters living here or elsewhere fight to the death. Roosters do sometimes struggle for dominance and territory but the fights are short and rarely lead to serious injury. Certainly, fights such as are seen in cockfighting spectacles, where the victorious bird continues to attack until the loser is dead, do not occur.

When a rooster has been bested, he assumes a submissive posture or runs away. The victor then postures or crows in a way that signals, "I've won!"

Breeders and trainers of fighting cocks prohibit the roosters from learning the social signals that allow such conflict resolution. Isolated in cages or tethered to stakes, fed less than they would choose to eat, and kept apart from hens, these roosters are in a constant state of frustrated excitation. Add the stress of transport, the confusing sights and sounds of a busy event, and the possible injection of drugs or hormones, and it's easy to see how some terrified roosters fight to the death when faced with a similarly terrified bird armed with steel talons.

That's the secret the "cockers" can't face and don't want you to know: These birds fight from fear, not aggression. That's the secret of our rehabilitation program, too.

We rehabilitate fighting cocks by teaching them that they don't have to be afraid of other birds. We use the same principles that a therapist might use in helping a person to overcome a phobia. At first, they simply need to be soothed and given time to see and be near other birds without becoming afraid. Then, during supervised

free periods such as the one that began this story, a former fighter is allowed to roam freely until he starts a fight. Then, it's back into a spacious cage from which he can see and interact with, but not hurt or be hurt by, the other birds. Over time, a rooster is able to be free for longer and longer periods (hence the boredom for us) until he can be trusted to mingle peacefully with the other birds all day long. The process takes anywhere from a few days to several weeks. Some birds "get it" very quickly and seem palpably relieved to be out of harm's way. Others take longer to relax. While personality clashes sometimes have required us to shift birds from yard to yard, we've not yet had a fighting cock so incorrigible that we couldn't find a place for him to be free.

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