

Chickens more than just dumb clucks

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Although chickens tend to be associated with junk cars and shantytowns in the country, the birds recently have acquired a more upscale status, perhaps after Martha Stewart started showing up on late night television crowing about her prize-winning Anaucana hens living in the Palais de Poulet and laying eggs in shades of her signature colors of blue and green.

Others have known about the peculiar charms of the clucking pullets for decades.

When a chain of shoe stores offered a baby chick with each pair of shoes purchased, a young Kim Sturla excitedly brought a bunch of the birds home. But suburbia proved to be a dangerous place for her newfound pets. Dogs, cats and automobiles took their toll and what was expected to be a warm and fuzzy experience turned into chick carnage.

“We loved the idea of taking home baby chicks, but we really had no idea on how to take care of them or realized that chickens, like any pet, required a long-term commitment. They can live to 13 to 20 years,” Sturla told United Press International.

Sturla, who now runs Animal Place in Vacaville, Calif., a nonprofit sanctuary for abused and discarded farmed animals, said chickens make wonderful companions. They are intelligent, social and show a remarkable ability to empathize and problem solve, she said.

“We rescued an elderly hen, Mary, from a city dump and later an elderly rooster, Notorious Boy. They bonded and they would roost on the picnic table,” Sturla said. “One stormy night with the rain really pelting down, I went to put them in the barn and I saw the rooster had his wing extended over the hen protecting her.”

Patrice Jones, who runs Eastern Shore Chicken Sanctuary on the Delmarva Peninsula of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia where many chickens are factory farmed and slaughtered, rescues chickens that fall off trucks on the way to be killed and processed.

“We brought in a hen with several wounds from her fall from the truck and I placed her near Heartbeat, a very active rooster, and he stopped dead when he saw her,” Jones told UPI. “He walked around her, he looked and studied each of her wounds, he made clucking noises that chickens do to soothe themselves to sleep and he lay down next to her. It was such a visible expression of empathy.”

Although Sturla found information on caring for her chicks hard to come by when she was a child, there is no shortage of books and Internet sites today.

Backyardchickens.com provides extensive links and even designs of chicken coops ranging

from the plywood box that can be made in a weekend to “Le Poulet Chalet,” a replica Swiss chalet for chickens that took three months of weekends to build.

“My family ‘inherited’ from my kindergartner’s class five chicks that the class watched hatch, but they grew far quicker than the teacher expected, and so they ‘appeared’ on our doorstep,” wrote Steven Kreitz, of Rosemount, Minn. “Our coop stands 8 feet tall, is cedar sided and trimmed, insulated and wired for electricity for heat.”

The Seattle Tilth Association sponsors a chicken coop tour where owners speak of their love for their chickens, their own popularity in the neighborhood from giving away fresh eggs and their feeling of connection with nature in crowded urban conditions.

Most municipalities outlaw chickens, but some allow for companion chickens of less than five and some allow small flocks.

“Chickens can be wonderful companions. They need a chicken coop where they can be locked at night so predators such as dogs or raccoons can’t get to them,” said Jones. They also need a foraging area and sunlight, which is necessary for healthy eggs, she added, “not to mention they aren’t housetrained.”

Some people do keep companion chickens in apartments, however.

“Chickens see infrared light so they see dawn before humans so they’re up early,” Karen Davis, who runs United Poultry Concerns, an activist group in Machipongo, Va., which promotes the compassionate treatment of domestic fowl. “We feed them cracked wheat and corn, seeds and produce but their prize food is spaghetti.”

The pecking order is determined by age and if a young chicken is introduced to the flock and moves toward the food bowl, an older chicken will peck it in the head. There also can be tussling by the dominant birds within the same age group.

“Chickens bust out of the coop greeting each day eagerly and run around and stretch their legs and wings,” Jones said. “They drink water and go to the food bowl or forage for food and then they settle down to socialize.”

Although all chickens like companionship and the welfare of the flock is important to them, some are loners. Also, some roosters hang out with hens and some roosters pal around together, according to Jones. “The hens who are laying eggs, find a nest or find a hiding place,” she said. “We have a hollow tree and it quite a sight to see the hens line up to lay their eggs there.”

Later the chickens dust bathe and sunbathe -- rubbing their bodies in the dust cleans them while sunbathing they sprawl out in various odd positions.

“The ultra violet rays of the sun kills mites and keeps the birds healthy,” Jones said. “In fact, almost everything that factory farming does goes against the birds natural behavior,

they are squashed together and can't stretch and run in sun, they have to take antibiotics to keep from being sick because of the hygiene and the lack of sun and they can't socialize as they normally would."

The oldest rooster leads the flock by keeping watch and he cries out to warn of predators or a new food source.

"Romeo was a sweet gentle rooster who always had five to seven girlfriends but when the top rooster died, he took over," Jones said. "You could tell he was fulfilling his role but he didn't like all the responsibility, so when we rescued some older roosters you could tell he was relieved and he went back to hanging out with his girlfriends."

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