Gallus gallus: An Underappreciated Pet

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Abstract

Introduction

Gallus gallus is a pheasant species, better known as the Heel junglefowl. Red junglefowl are widespread in Southeast Asia, where they inhabit wooded areas in the warmer southern regions of that vast area (Bump and Bohl 1961; Delacour 1977; Johngard 1999). Living in small groups consisting of one male and up to four females, they forage for seeds, insects, fruits and greens by scratching under leaves and through the soil. Females leave the flock to nest and apparently raise their chicks by themselves.

Red junglefowl in the wild are threatened with extinction. Not only are they losing their habitat as the burgeoning human population of Southeast Asia encroaches on and cuts down their woodlands, but they are in danger of genetic extinction from the swamping effect of the sheer numbers of their highly successful descendant, the most common bird in the world - the domestic chicken (Peterson and Brisbin 1999).

There is some debate as to exactly when and where Red junglefowl were domesticated to eventually become chickens (see Crawford 1984, Fumihito et al. 1994), but the earliest conclusive evidence of domestic fowl comes from archeological sites in Pakistan and China. By Greek and Roman times several distinct breeds had been developed, with the main differences being whether the birds were bred for fighting or for food. In the mid 19th century chickens became the first domestic animals to be selectively bred following specific breed standards, resulting in the formation of the American Poultry Association in 1873.

Today the majority of chickens in the United States belong to a production form of the familiar white leghorn, as this breed has become the dominant commercial chicken. However, the American Poultry Association’s America 11 Standard of Perfection (1998) recognizes roughly 50 standard and 40 bantam breeds, many of which come in a multitude of varieties. There are hundreds of hobby breeders producing beautiful chickens all across the United States, so at least for now we haven't lost these specialized breeds.

Pet Chickens

So, all of the above is very interesting, but why do I care? I keep finches/parrots/softbills - chickens are stupid, dirty farm animals that are only suitable for back-to-the-land types who live in the sticks. I only need them for eggs, McNuggets, and my "country style" decorating. Chickens are nor pets, right?

WRONG! Chickens make great pets. True, they are outside pets, and have some specialized needs, but all of our pet animals have requirements for care that those of us who keep them arc quite willing to meet.

Chickens are easier, and cheaper, to keep than many if not most other pet birds. They are also much more responsive to human attention than virtually all the other birds we keep (excluding parrots). Chickens are domestic animals, and thousands of generations over hundreds of year have lived with, and been tamed by, their human caretakers. They therefore accept humans as part of their world, and in many cases, as part of their flocks.

As with most pets, the best way to get a really tame pet chicken is to keep only one bird. And the best way to get that bird is to raise a chick. Chickens, like many of the gamebird and cuck species, imprint on (accept as their mother and subsequently as their flockmate) the first large animal they see. A chick that imprints on humans becomes a very handleable and responsive adult bird. This is not to say that an older chicken cannot learn to become a good pet, but a chick that grows up considering humans as part of its flock does not need to be taught that it is a pet.

So, how do you obtain a chick?

There are two ways: hatch your own from a fertile egg, or buy one from a local feed store. We will consider these options separately.

If you have, or have access to, an incubator, then the absolute best way to get your pet chicken is to hatch it yourself. Most of us are aware of the fact that the eggs we buy in the store are infertile, coming from hens who have never had contact with a rooster. So, where do you get fertile eggs? First, decide what breed of chicken you would like to have (see the American Standard of Perfection), and then find breeders in your area. Check with the American Poultry Association or the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (addresses at the end) for breeders.

Chicken eggs ship well, so even if a breeder is inconveniently far away you can often arrange to buy fertile eggs through the mail. And, why not pick one of the rarer breeds? You can help to preserve these livestock antiques, many of which are strikingly beautiful and may be in danger of extinction. And they are so much more interesting than the standard white leghorn!
This brings up an important point. To ensure that at least one chick hatches, it is best to set several eggs. Hatching several chicks has many advantages: you'll have more than one to choose from, allowing you to pick the one whose personality fits you best (yes, chickens do have personalities); you'll be able to choose either a rooster or a hen (at 4-6 weeks of age); and you'll have the fun of watching the interactions of a group of chicks. You'll have a bit more work (marginally), and you'll have to interact with more birds so they'll all imprint (more play than work), but you'll have a clear idea of which will be your best pet.

Now, how do I tell if I've got a rooster or a hen? Little roosters start developing their combs much earlier (often at 2-3 weeks) than their sisters, and they will start to crow at 4-5 weeks. Roosters make very good pets if their crowing is not a problem. They often have spectacular plumage and are bolder than hens. Hens are of course quieter, and have the advantage of being a source of free eggs when they begin to lay.

What happens if they all hatch?

You only wanted one chicken - what are you going to do with the others? Don't assume that your local farm, petting zoo, or feed store will take them - they probably won't. The ideal solution is to work out a deal with the breeder you got your eggs from to return the older chicks after you've made your choice. This is a win-win situation. You get a nice pet, and the breeder gets someone to do the work of getting young chicks through the first crucial weeks. Many breeders might even gamble a few eggs on you for free if you make this sort of arrangement. Another possibility is to go in with a friend or neighbor who also wants a pet chicken. However you do it, make sure you have homes for all of the chicks before you hatch them.

The other main source for chicks is feed stores. Many feed stores still sell clay-old chicks at very reasonable prices. You will have many fewer breeds to choose from but you won't have to spend 21 days tending an incubator full of hatching eggs either. Find out what day the store expects their next shipment of chicks so that they will still be very young (and imprintable) and so that you will have more to choose from. Ask the store if you can catch your own chick, then place your hand in with the chicks. Select one of the curious (more friendly and probably more intelligent) chicks that approaches your hand. You can inquire whether the chicks are straight run (mixed sexes); cockerels (males) or pullets (females), and make your choice accordingly.

Before either hatching or buying your chicks, have an area set up for their housing. Young chicks chill easily, so should not be kept outdoors. Besides, you want them where you can interact with them to encourage them to be responsive pets, and where you can keep an eye on their development. This means that they should be set up inside, ideally in a centrally-located area. A second bedroom or family room works well, provided that the chicks are safe from other pets and young children. Basements are not the best choice, clue to their generally chilly nature and the fact that they are somewhat removed from the rest of the family, but will do if no where else is available.

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References

Bibliography


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