



# POULTRY

## Chickens

Chickens came to Ireland from Southeast Asia, where they used to live in the jungles. The original wild chicken is far removed from the heavy hen we are used to seeing today. They are sociable birds who live happily together scratching about for vegetation and insects to eat, they will also eat small frogs, baby rats, they are opportunists.

The origin of the bird is actually prehistoric, at one time their ancestors were much larger and would have been a danger to prehistoric man. Oh, how times have changed for the humble hen of today.

Hens are good mothers, protecting their young by shielding them under their feathers. When they are not caring for eggs or young, chickens in the wild and in domestication if the opportunity arises, will roost for the night up in the tree canopy, safe from ground dwelling predators.

## Poultry for Eggs

The egg came before the chicken: it evolved before they did. However, for farmers the chicken comes first. It must be fed and maintained or it won't produce.



There are many factors involved in poultry. Bird health and nutrition are the main factors. There are many diseases that can affect poultry. Avian flus are a common problem associated with poultry agriculture.

The modern hen has been conditioned over generations to keep laying eggs from spring to autumn, and on into the winter if kept in conditions with artificial daylight and warmth. For those living in factory conditions, life consists of sitting in a box with food and

water, and little else, followed by slaughter once her laying has slowed, usually after a year.

Regulations are in place these days to improve the life of the hen, with "battery farming" being outlawed in many places, although cages still exist.



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"Free Range" hens live in sheds with access to outside and freedom to roam during the day. However, the reality of this does not always live up to expectations. The hens are still packed to a density that is not healthy, nor is it socially acceptable to the birds, leading to a lot of bullying. The fluffy hen we all associate with the "aaaah" factor is not above cannibalism, as any chicken keeper will tell you. It's not easy to introduce a new bird into an established flock, they will attack her.



The other real negative for commercial poultry, whether raised for eggs or meat, is the fact that cockerels are not needed. At a very young age the chicks are sexed and the males are usually killed immediately, then to go into the pet-food and exotic animal feed industries.

### **Poultry for Meat**

Again, industry has manipulated the humble hen over generations to produce a fast product for a mass market. Meat hens are much heavier than their ancestors, gaining weight so quickly that by the time they go for slaughter they cannot stand, often suffering broken legs. Their average lifespan is just 35 days.



Organic poultry should have a better life, at least without the hormones, but the best life is that of the smallholder with a few hens in the backyard. These flocks are usually given more freedom and allowed to express their natural behaviours. Many will be considered "pets." They can live up to this expectation, they are clever and can enjoy interaction with humans.

Grouse is one of the many farmed birds. In Ireland, the shooting season is the whole of the month of September. Pheasants are also farmed and released into the environment. Pheasants are a jungle bird from Asia (the same as chickens.) Beaters are used to chase the birds into the air to make it easy for rich tourists (who also fly) to shoot lead at them and at the environment generally.

### **Companion Poultry**

Some people keep birds as companion animals. Many birds can learn to imitate the human voice and this can provide some amusement and interest.

Poultry may also be kept for security as birds, such as geese, will alert you of dangers or strangers in the guard dog role.

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### **Poultry for Pest Control & Lawn Maintenance**

Some agricultural traditions advocate the use of poultry for combined practical purposes. Poultry eat plants, slugs and other small animals. Poultry can be kept in gardens or herded en-masse to fields to hunt out slugs or small weeds in a stand of crops.

Geese make great guard "dogs" and are also good lawn-mowers, grazing the grass in the orchard without damaging the trees.



### **Related Videos & Websites**

- ⇒ [Article on Poultry Keeping](#) ⇐
- ⇒ [Organic Poultry Farming](#) ⇐
- ⇒ [Fun Video of Home Egg Business](#) ⇐

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