

Gallus gallus: An Underappreciated Pet

by Nancy Bent, Brookfield, Illinois

Introduction

Gallus gallus is a pheasant species, better known as the Red Junglefowl. Red Junglefowls 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; Johnsgard 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 descendent, 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 *American 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 not 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 are 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 years 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 duck 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.

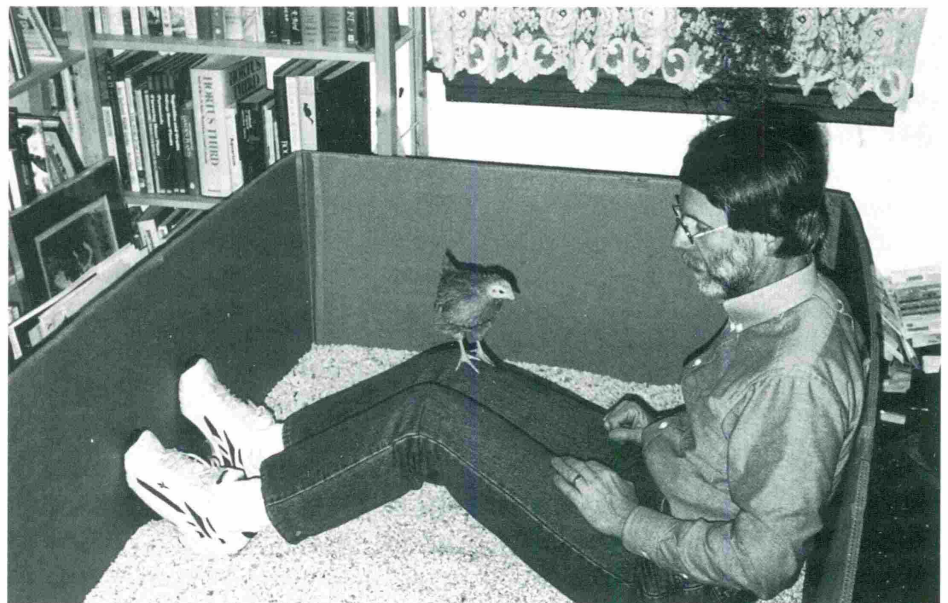


Photo by Nancy Bent

Sitting in the brooder box brings you into the chick's world and makes you firm friends.



By taking the place of the mother hen, brooding chicks helps them to imprint on you.

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 day-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 chick(s), 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, due 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.

A large cardboard box or similar container (often obtainable from the big chain hardware stores), lined for the first few days with a sheet (so the chicks can easily find their food) and later (after about 5 days) with cob bedding, provided with a heat source (infrared heat lamp), food (chick starter, available at all feed stores) and water (shallow, lined with marbles or large aquarium gravel so that the chicks don't drown) is all young chicks need. Place the heat

lamp at one end of the box and regulate the temperature to hold at about 95°F. right under the lamp. Place the food and water at the other end of the box. The chicks will regulate their body temperature by moving to or away from the heat, and moving back and forth between heat and food/water will give them exercise. The temperature can be dropped about 5°F. per week until the brooder is the same temperature as the room the box is in.

Install your day-old chicks in the box (after they are fully dry and fluffy if you hatched them) and watch to make sure that they eat and drink. Chicken chicks are precocial, meaning that they will feed themselves, but you need to ensure that all are eating. Scatter some of the feed on the old sheet so that they will see it and instinctively peck at it. The marbles or aquarium gravel in the water also encourages pecking and consequent drinking. It helps to tap the food dish with your finger and call "chick chick chick" in a fairly high voice – this resembles both the food call of a mother hen and the pecking she would do next to tidbits of food. It also trains the chicks to your voice, so that when they become adults they will still come running when they hear "chick chick chick!"

Good treats for young chicks include chopped greens, shredded carrots, frozen corn (thawed, of course) and mealworms. All of these can be hand fed to the chicks so that they learn that people bring nice treats and are therefore worth knowing. Calling chicks when giving them treats also reinforces them to come when they are called, and will facilitate later care of them as adults.

One of the best ways to make pets of your chicks is to be with them as much as possible. When they are very young (1-3 days or so), and if your box is big enough, climb right in with them and (carefully!) sit down. The chicks are attracted to larger animals – after all, mom is much bigger than they are – and if you sit quietly,

call them, and offer them tidbits they will happily jump onto your lap, roost on your feet, and generally use you as a jungle gym. When they are a little older you can take them out of the box and onto the couch with you while you watch TV. The cooler temperatures away from their heat lamp will encourage them to brood with you, tucked between your arms and your body or up on your shoulder, and will further reinforce their bond with you.

And what about the droppings? Chickens of course cannot be house broken, so yes, they will poop on you and on anything else they happen to be standing on. However, they are very easy to clean up after as the droppings will be small and fairly dry – the dry quality of their chick starter diet ensures a much neater end product than the fruit diet of parrots! Furniture and rugs can be covered with an old towel or sheet for protection.

Chicks begin to feather out quite early. Their wings usually begin to show by the second or third day, tail feathers show at about ten days, and body plumage pushes through the natal down at around two weeks. By 6-8 weeks the chicks will be lanky copies of their parents and will be ready for their next home. If you have hatched several chicks, now is the time to make your choice and return the others to the breeder. Your pet will bond even more closely to you when its siblings have left.

When the daytime temperatures are reliably above 60° during the day and 32° at night then your chick can be moved outside. Chickens can be easily kept in a fenced yard. The fence should be at least three feet high and free of holes in and underneath the fence itself. Adult chickens cannot fly, but are very curious and will quickly discover and exploit any weak points in the fence. Gardens can be fenced with shorter fencing – two feet will deter most chickens.

Chickens must have a secure shelter for the night. They are vulner-

able to attack by raccoons, foxes, coyotes, and great horned owls, and so must be locked inside for their own safety. The Luttmann's chicken book (see list at end) provides plans for building chicken houses, and gives good general advice for the perches and bedding that chickens will need. A chicken house can be adapted from a prefabricated garden shed, or you can house them in a pen in your garage. Garage pens can be easily created with garden wire (3 feet high) fencing off an unused portion of the garage. Bedding or washable rugs must be provided as chickens are prone to bumblefoot when standing on concrete for long periods.

What about winter's cold? Chickens, being descended from semitropical pheasants, are prone to frostbite on their combs, wattles, and toes when it gets bitterly cold. Infrared heat lamps work very well at keeping a small shed or garage pen warm – if the chicken's water is not freezing then it is warm enough for your pet. A good rule of thumb is not to let the birds out of their shelter if it is 15° F. or lower. They don't really enjoy weather that cold and the risk of frostbite is just too great.

For those in the hotter climates where winter is not a problem but summer heat could be, just remember that wild junglefowl inhabit mostly forested regions – so provide plenty of shade where the birds can get out of the sun. This and a steady supply of fresh water is all they will need for thermo-regulation in hot summers anywhere.

Pet chickens can be fed a commercial layer diet as their main food, with the addition of coarse oyster shell grit. Many feed stores will mix the grit into the feed for you, but if you have a laying hen it helps to have some grit handy so that you can give her more. Another excellent source of calcium is to crush and feed to your hen the used eggshells from the eggs that she has thoughtfully provided for you.

Chickens will also spend their day busily foraging for insects,

greens and seeds throughout your yard, supplementing their main diet with these natural food items. And you, of course, will still be hand feeding them with such treats as raisins, sunflower seeds, and shelled peanuts. Another nice treat is any left over fruits and vegetables, such as parings, skins, cores, etc., that your kitchen might produce. Don't dump them down the disposal, feed them to your chicken!

Maintaining your friendship with your pet is easy – join your fowl in the yard. You will find that if you sit in a lawn chair that your chicken will come and sit with you, either under your chair or even jumping up in your lap. Chickens also love to “help” with any gardening you do, grabbing any worms or bugs you turn up. Remember to pick up your chicken regularly so it stays accustomed to contact.

If you decide to keep a hen you can expect to start getting delicious free-range eggs when she starts to lay at 5-6 months old. It is hard to beat a truly fresh egg for flavor, and you will be amazed at the dark orange-yellow color of the yolks produced by a hen that has been out in the sun and eating plenty of bugs and greens. You will never want to eat store bought, battery-caged eggs again. And since your hen will generally lay one egg per day for at least eight months out of the year (stopping only to molt or in the dead of winter) you may find that you will have eggs to give to the neighbors.

You can generally expect a healthy pet chicken to live 5-6 years, though chickens have been known to live up to 15 years. Roosters often outlive hens as all that egg-laying can shorten a hen's lifespan. When your bird begins to age you can start another chick in the house as a replacement. Your present bird will usually welcome the company of another chicken, so if the two birds overlap for awhile you can enjoy your little flock. Overlapping hens like this will also ensure a steady

supply of eggs as older hens will begin to lay erratically or stop producing eggs altogether.

I hope I have convinced you that you have room in your life, and in your back yard, for a chicken. There can be a real sense of companionship from a bird that runs over to see you whenever you enter the yard, sits on your lap, eats treats from your hand, or sleeps next to your feet as you watch the sun set from your lawn chair on a summer evening. Chickens make terrific pets!

Acknowledgements

Roger Reason has been an equal “parent” to all of our chicks. Larry Reynolds, breeder of New Hampshires, provided our last batch of eggs.

Bibliography

- American Poultry Association, Inc. 1998. *American Standard of Perfection*. Mendon, MA: American Poultry Association, Inc.
- Bump, Gardiner and Bohl, Wayne H. 1961. *Red Junglefowl and Kalij Pheasants* (Special Scientific Report - Wildlife No. 62). Washington, DC: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Crawford, R.D. 1984. Domestic Fowl. In: Mason, I.L. (editor). *Evolution of Domesticated Animals*. London: Longman.



Photo by Nancy Bent

The end result — a happy, healthy, and friendly pet chicken (pictured is the author's own pet New Hampshire hen).

- Delacour, Jean. 1977. *The Pheasants of the World*, second edition. Hindhead (Surrey), UK: Spur Publications.
- Fumihito, A. et al. 1994. One subspecies of the Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus gallus*) suffices as the matriarchic ancestor of all domestic breeds. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* **91**: 12505-12509.
- Johnsgard, Paul A. 1999. *The Pheasants of the World: Biology and Natural History*, second edition. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Peterson, A. Townsend and Brisbin, I. Lehr Jr. 1999. Genetic endangerment of wild Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*? *Bird Conservation International* **9**: 387-394.

Addresses

American Livestock
Breeds Conservancy
PO Box 477
Pittsboro, NC 27312 919-542-5704
albc@albc-usa.org

American Poultry Association, Inc.
133 Millville Street
Mendon MA 01756
508-473-8769

Favorite Books

- Damerow, Gail. 1995. *A Guide to Raising Chickens: Care - Feeding - Facilities*. Pownal, VT: Storey Communications, Inc.
- Luttmann, Rick and Gail. 1976. *Chickens in Your Backyard: A Beginner's Guide*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press.
- Smith, Page and Daniel, Charles. 1975. *The Chicken Book* Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company. ♦

Advertisers Index

AFA Tampa Convention '02	37
AFA Store	Inside Front Cover
Amer. Pheasant & Waterfowl Soc... ..	46
Amy B. Worell, DVM	47
Assoc. of Avian Veterinarians	55
Birdbrain, The	51
Classified Ads	79
Cuttlebone Plus	47
Everybody's Bird Mart (Pomona, CA)	30
Gabriel Foundation	34
Hagen, Rolf C. (USA)/Prime	42
Lyon Electric Co.	45
Magnolia Bird Farm	34
Mutations Unlimited	71
Pet Air	35
South Texas Bird Symposium	53
Sun Seed Co., Inc.	Back Cover
The Birdcare Company	9
Veterinarian Listing	15
Virtual Solutions Inc	71

AFA Classified Advertising and Club Information

AFA CLASSIFIED ADS

SPECIAL: Domestic ready-to-go Amazon male breeders: Yellow-headed; Blue-fronted; Spectacled. Call Yvonne 415-388-5466 CA

ABRC HAS SURPLUS BIRDS FOR SALE: Pairs & singles, Macaws, Cockatoos, Eclectus, Greys. Call Terry at 561-790-0729 in Loxahatchee, FL

BREEDER PAIRS: B&G Macaws, YN Amazons (PROVEN) & BF Amazons. In excellent health!! 936-856-1510 TX

WANTED: Brazilian Cardinals (Red Crested Cardinals) for breeding project. Call Cesar Mena D.V.M. 305-388-5556 FL

Coming Soon...

PRO-VITAL®

PROVEN PAIR DYH AMAZONS; Gorgeous pair, \$1200; Handfed Umbrella Cockatoo male, poor feather, sweet, needs TLC, 3 1/2 yrs. Norene, 559-325-2850 CA

BREEDERS: Home/Car brooders operate in home and car. Two sizes, thermostatically controlled. Under \$230 each. Humidity, ventilation, viewing lid. Mastercard/Visa. Warranty. Phone: 419-331-1202 OH

MEALY COLLECTION FOR SALE:

5 pairs at \$825 per pair, 1 Mealy male at \$650, 1 Mealy female at \$825; OTHERS: 1 Orange Wing at \$350, 2 Bolivian Blue and Gold males at \$725 ea; 1 Maxi Pionus male at \$225. All are mature birds, some are domestic. Must sell due to zoning issues. Please phone 206-762-7300 or e-mail: bernie@foxinternet.net or WA

ABS PLASTIC NEST BOXES: Several sizes and styles - custom, too. Eagle creek Exotics 503-630-5894 OR

FOR SALE: Lineolated Parakeets. All colors currently available in the U.S including Cinnamon. Domestically bred, not imports. Breeding stock only, no pet sales. Bob Nelson or David Palmer 541-396-2360 OR

GENERAL HOOKBILLS

Attn: Pet Store Owners: Tropical Gardens Aviary & Associates have over 55 species from which to choose, from lorries to macaws. One-stop shopping saves airfare. Over 20 yrs experience. References available. tele 904-275-3075.

Email: ruhe@nufcom.net.

1 -- 4 2002

CLUB INFORMATION

The Avicultural Society of Tucson will hold its 20th Exotic Bird Expo on Sunday, October 6, 2002, 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Rodeway Inn Event Center, Grant Road and I-10, Exit 256. Admission is \$5. For more information contact Squig Lekawa at 520-790-7587, or E-mail ringnecklady@msn.com

The Ann Arbor Cage Bird Club proudly presents its 17th Annual Exotic Bird Exhibition on Sunday, August 4, 10:00 AM-5:00 PM. Tables will be overflowing with exotic birds, safe bird toys, cages, play stands, nutritious food, T-shirts, raffle prizes, artwork, and magazines. Over 1,200 are expected to attend this popular event and hear Katy McElroy speak on breeding cockatoos outdoors in cold Ohio weather. Her slides and video Explain COCKATOOS GOOD AND BAD. A unique, African Grey batik quilt will be raffled too. \$3.00 donation for adults and children 12 and older. Location: Weber's Inn, 3050 Jackson Road, Ann Arbor (just off I-94 west). For more information call co-chairs Chris Karpo 734-429-5343 (rek@provide.net) or Carol Aldrich 734-971-4566 (caldrich@umich.edu)

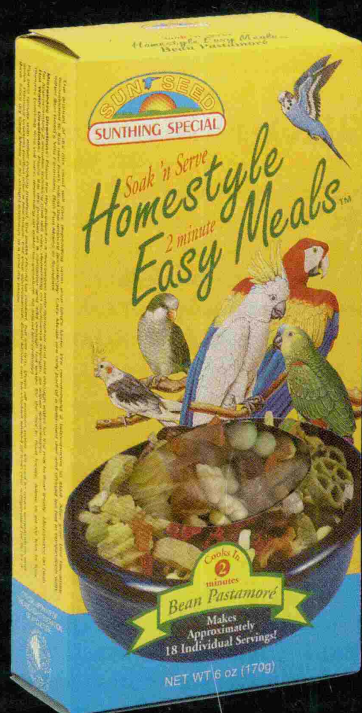
October 6th **San Diego CA: North County Aviculturists** 12th Annual Bird Mart, Bernardo Winery, 13330 Paseo Del Verano Norte, Rancho Bernardo. 10-4 Info: 760-765-1406 Booth Rental: 760-806-4433. E-mail:

nca_birdclub@yahoo.com

November 2, 2002. Plainville, Conn., Ramada Inn (860-747-6876) **Connecticut Association For Aviculture** annual symposium. Speaker: Joanna Burger, author of *The Parrot Who Owns Me*. Vendors, classes. Info: Kim (9am-5pm EDT) 860-875-5349 or website:

www.cafabirdclub.org

From This...



HOMESTYLE EASY MEALS Bean Pastamoré from Sun Seed Company is the first "soak and serve" food for birds that can be prepared in just two minutes. This delicious combination of all natural pasta, freeze dried vegetables and dehydrated fruits offers great nutrition and the ultimate in convenience.

The freeze dried vegetables and protein rich beans are favored by birds because they retain more nutrition and flavor, plus they regain their original shape and texture quickly after being soaked in water. This mix is one that your pet is sure to love! Available in a 6oz. nitrogen flushed bag in a box package which will make approximately 18 servings.

Homestyle Easy Meals...great nutrition has never been easier!

To This...



In Just 2 Minutes!
Now That's An
...Easy Meal!



What are
YOU *waiting for?*

For more information contact us at:
Sun Seed Company, Inc. • P.O. Box 33
Bowling Green, Ohio 43402
or visit the store locator on our
website at www.sunseed.com