

BASIC CHICKEN CARE

Mary Britton Clouse
Chicken Run Rescue
2010

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE ACQUIRING A CHICKEN

lifespan

- Chickens can live as long as a dog or cat- up to 14 years or longer.
- Egg laying for a hen generally starts at 6 months old, peaks at 18 months and declines with age.

cost

- Start Up costs for coop, maintenance, tools, cleaning, equipment, heating / cooling appliances, dishes, nets, food storage, scale, fencing, security locks, lighting, motion detectors, monitors, cameras, permit application (\$2-3,000)
- Annual supplies per bird for food, bedding, nutritional supplements, hygiene supplies, permit fee, utilities (\$300)
- Vet care per bird per service (office exam \$66, fecal test \$28, plus other services as needed for illness or injury). Are you able to provide the birds with proper veterinary care needed?

time

- Average 1 hour per bird per day minimum for cleaning, parasite control, grooming, physical exam, travel time to purchase supplies, construction, repair, medication, feeding, supervise free time out of pen.
- Chickens need to be tended to twice daily. Will you have a person ready to substitute for you when you have reason to be absent?

space

At least a 6'W x 12'L x 6'H space in a yard is needed for a coop and pen for 4 birds in addition to a larger fenced area for regular exercise.

location

Coop and pen should be located in an area that provides shade, direct sunlight, good drainage and protection from prevailing winds and will not present a problem to neighbors.

uninvited guests

Chickens will attract bird mites and lice, mice, yard birds, squirrels, raccoons, dogs, coyotes, fox, mink, opossum, rats, owls, bobcats, hawks, snakes, weasels, ferrets, fisher, marten and humans.

ACQUIRING A CHICKEN

ADOPTION OR PURCHASE/BREEDING?

The recent interest in having chickens has overwhelmed animal rescue organizations with inquiries from people wanting to give up chickens who are no longer wanted. Like all other animals surrendered to shelters, rescue organizations cannot help them all. There are never enough homes for displaced animals so adoption of birds who need homes is always the kindest choice instead of purchase from a breeder or hatchery.

adoption- By adopting from a rescue organization or a private individual, you can know what to expect with regard to the bird's health, sex, behavior and personality. Reputable rescue organizations can provide advice on selecting the right bird, care information and generally have a generous return policy to insure that bird will be happy, compatible and well cared for.

purchase/breeding- The identification of the sex of chicks by feed stores, breeders and hatcheries is often wrong and not apparent until the bird is 6 months old. 50% of the chicks hatched are roosters who are killed or otherwise discarded as waste. Newborn chicks shipped through the postal service are deprived of their mothers, warmth and food. The younger the bird the more fragile and difficult they are to care for.

HEALTHY BIRD CHECKLIST

Eyes: clear, clean, wide open, alert

Face / comb / wattle: clean, soft, blemish free, healthy deep red indicating good blood supply, (some faces are not red)

Posture: head erect, good balance, stand or perch on both feet on extended legs, good grip on perch, facing activity

Odor: none or slightly fermented hay

Beak / nostrils: clean, uniform, shiny and solid

Legs / feet: clean, shiny, uniform scales and nails, foot bottom soft and blemish free, legs and toes straight and functional

Feathers; clean, bright, shiny, smooth or fluffy, free of mites or lice

Wings: held close to body, symmetrical, smooth movement in joints when flexed, flight feathers intact

Skin: clean, soft, pale pink and translucent (some breeds have bare red patches at shoulders and keel), free of mites or lice

Droppings: 70% odorless green/ white, firm, 30% stinky brown pasty (cecal), watery if stressed

Keel (sternum): Straight, good muscle mass on either side, lump free

Crop (on bird's right side of lower neck): full, contents of consumed food easily palpated

Vent: petite, clean, moist, soft, pliant

Respiration: 12-37 per min., inspiration louder and shorter than expiration, minimal chest movement, closed beak

NUMBER OF BIRDS

Calculating available space, time, and cost (see above) will dictate how many birds can be properly cared for:

coop: 4 sq. feet of floor space minimum per bird for the interior (an area 2 ft. x 2 ft. per bird)

pen: 10 sq. ft of floor space minimum per bird (an area 3 ft. x 3.3 ft per bird)

range/ exercise yard: 174 sq. ft per bird (an area about 10 ft. x 17 ft per bird)

A single chicken is a sad chicken. Plan to have at least 2- they are flock animals and need the companionship of other chickens. Generally, 3-5 compatible chickens can be well maintained in a typical city environment. Individual bird's sex, age and temperament can affect compatibility. Over crowding chickens is the most common mistake. Hens should outnumber roosters. Sometimes single birds can thrive with a human friend if they have special needs. Roosters, single or in pairs, are very sociable and can make terrific companions if handled gently and often.

HANDLING & RESTRAINT

Never handle a chicken by wings, feet or legs. Herd bird to corner using slow deliberate movement.

Fast= predator, slow = less threat. Place hands over top part of wings (shoulders) and hold securely but do not squeeze. Pick up and hold under arm to keep wings in place. Support feet with other hand if bird will tolerate. To restrain for transport or examination, drape a towel over shoulders cape style and wrap around body.

TRANSPORTATION

Consider travel time and avoid extreme weather conditions. Heat exhaustion can develop quickly, interior car temps can reach fatal point 10 minutes. Medium sized hard pet carriers work well for

security, safety, stress. Line with a towel, shredded paper or straw. Food is a good stress reducer. Offer wet food like greens or cucumber for long trips.

ARRIVAL

If other birds are already present, a 2 week quarantine in a separate area is recommended to watch for signs of illness and parasites. Avoid noisy, high traffic areas and allow the bird to acclimate before introducing to other birds, animals and family.

PROVIDING A GOOD HOME

NATURAL HISTORY

It is important to understand how chickens live in the wild and to provide them with an environment that meets those instinctive physical and psychological needs as closely as possible. Chickens are all descended from Tropical Jungle Fowl are adapted to living in a natural habitat that is spacious, richly vegetated, diverse and warm. This presents a particular challenge in a small urban setting in a cold climate like Minnesota.

Flocks have a highly developed social structure and depend on each for companionship and security. Naturalists have observed that they can recognize and remember 180 other individual flock members. They are ground dwelling birds. Most are capable of low flight in short distances, smaller birds can fly higher and farther.

In the wild they roost in trees at dusk before they sleep or to escape predators. They hide their nests in cavities in the ground. The majority of their waking hours are spent active, wide ranging, grazing, foraging for food- plants, bugs and occasionally small rodents. In their natural state. They typically travel 1/2 mile from their roost each day. In the wild, they are never over crowded- if the population becomes to dense, members will break off into subgroups and spread out. They move on from one area to another which allows food sources to regenerate and their waste is not concentrated in one place and it can decompose without health risk to the flock.

Roosters alert the flock to danger, find food and call the hens to it and stand guard as they eat. They select and build nests and will even participate in caring for the young. They also act as peace keepers to intervene in disputes that can develop between flock members. Roosters will start to crow and display courting behaviors at about 6 months of age. It is essential to gently handle a rooster on a daily basis to establish that you are the flock leader (Alpha) and maintain a well socialized companion.

The hens spend their time scratching for food, dust bathing, preening, playing and napping. Hens begin to lay eggs at about 6 months of age. Hen in the wild produce only a few clutches of eggs a year for the sole purpose of reproduction. Domesticated hens have been bred to lay one egg a day but by 18 month of age, egg laying frequency generally diminishes and many adult or senior hens stop laying altogether.

Chickens are sociable, cheerful and intelligent creatures who can form lifelong bonds with each other and other species including humans, dogs and cats. Because of their keen intelligence and instinctive physical activity, they need a stimulating environment that mimics as much as possible the rich and diverse world nature designed them to enjoy.

COOP, PEN, RANGE/ EXERCISE YARD

"Housing and infrastructure. The primary purpose of poultry housing is to protect flocks against adverse weather and predators (coyote, fox, stray dogs, raccoons and raptors). Weather is of critical concern in the Upper Midwest, where summers can be extremely hot and winters bitterly cold. Housing must

provide shade from sun and cover from rain. It must be able to withstand high winds and snow loads if it is to be used for year-round operation. These basic housing considerations apply to all poultry”
-“Poultry Your Way: A Guide to Management Alternatives for the Upper Midwest”, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 2005

COOP: The house, closed structure or enclosed room which provides shelter from cold, heat, wind, rain, snow and predators for protected roosting, nesting, feeding and watering space.

Construction & Materials – Coops can be purchased ready made or in kits, constructed within an existing structure or built from scratch. Local building codes should be followed to prevent damage from snow, wind, etc. **NOTE:** rabbit hutches, plastic igloos, dog houses and such are not appropriate structures.

Required features:

size: 4 sq. feet of floor space minimum is required per bird for the interior (an area 2 ft. x 2 ft. per bird). So 4 birds will need a coop with at least 4 feet x 4 feet inside floor space not including nest boxes.

Outside dimensions should be about 5 feet by 5 feet x 6 ft. high. Overcrowding is the most common cause of behavior problems, injury and disease. Coop should be high enough for a human to stand up comfortably for cleaning, maintenance and egg collection. It also allows for additional roosting. Temperament and social structures should be taken into account, and partitions should be available for birds who are sick, injured or lower in the pecking order.

access to electricity is required in free standing structures.

floor – The floor should not collect and hold moisture, be easy to clean, retain heat in cold weather and exclude rodents/predators. A dirt floor draws heat away and is not easy to clean or rodents/predators proof. A wood floor is adequate provided it is at least a foot off the ground, insulated and sealed properly but is difficult to sanitize because it is porous. a concrete floor is ideal since it discourages rodents/predators and is easy to sanitize. Regardless of the floor type, bedding strewn on the surface is needed to absorb moist fecal matter and facilitate cleaning. Leaves or wood shavings work best and can be composted or easily bagged and disposed of as solid waste.

walls- Materials that are resistant to moisture and mold and easily cleaned are best. Chemically treated materials should be nontoxic. A good compound with anti fungal agents is good for humid areas. Clear varnish is also good. Everything should be treated or painted before it is assembled. Wooden structures should be draft free and built with double walls that have at least 1 1/2 inch insulated layer between them.

roof: The coop roof should be made of a material that will not collect and hold heat and should be built with double walls that have at least 1 1/2 inch insulated layer between them. The roof surfaced should be covered with an insulating tar paper to protect from heavy rains. The roof should be slightly inclined, to allow water to run off and if it overhangs at the front wall it will protect from downpours. A few small openings along the eaves allow moisture to escape and provide fresh air.

doors: One human-size door is needed for daily access. Doors for chickens should be just large enough for the largest bird and can be positioned anywhere from ground level to about 2 feet high with a stable ramp with cleats. Chickens are ground dwellers, not parrots-small doors at heights greater than 3 feet with flimsy, unstable ladders are not appropriate. Doors must be able to be secured against predators at night.

windows: Chickens love windows and need natural light. Double glaze for warmth. Cover with 1/2” metal screen so they can be opened for ventilation in hot weather. Allow one square foot of window for each 10 square foot of floor space.

roosts: Lumber or branches can be used. They should be strong enough and mounted securely enough to hold all birds. The surface should be rough for good grip with no splinters or sharp edges. For medium sized birds, 2” or 4 “ flat or 1 1/2” diameter is best for foot comfort. The longer roost the better to prevent competition. They should be set 18” from wall, 2 -3 feet off the floor. If mounted higher, rung steps are needed spaced 8-12 inches apart. The addition of a dropping board underneath and elevated roost will collect droppings and keep floor space below clean and inhabitable.

climate: Shelters should be kept at a comfortable temperature for the animals. “Minimum Temperature 55°(f) , maximum temperature 70°(F)”

-“Poultry Your Way: A Guide to Management Alternatives for the Upper Midwest”, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 2005

The coop should be heated to maintain a temperature above 32 degrees during the coldest part of the winter and cooled below 85 in the hottest part of the summer.

Below 32 degrees birds are uncomfortable and cannot maintain body temperature. Below 15 degrees frostbite begins, and hypothermia increases. Oil or water filled safety heaters (i.e. brands Pelonis, DeLonghi, Honeywell) are completely closed and sealed systems that run on electricity. The oil is heated from within and the heat is radiant so there are no exposed heating elements that create dangerous problems even if they tip over. Heat lamps should only be used with extreme caution and be firmly attached at least 3 feet from animals and far from any flammable item, especially dry straw or bedding. Smoke alarms are highly recommended. Extra bedding should be available to keep animals warm and comfortable in cold seasons.

Between 75 and 85 degrees, panting and dehydration begin, above 85 heat stress and danger of heat prostration increases.

ventilation- Doors, windows and vents near the ceiling supply oxygen, remove heat from breathing, remove moisture from breath and droppings, harmful gasses and dust particles, and dilute disease causing airborne organisms. Fans should be provided for hottest weather.

light: Natural light from windows and/or skylights is required. Can be supplemented with full spectrum incandescent light to follow normal seasonal light cycles and for cleaning and maintenance. The minimum light intensity you should provide should be enough to clearly see the hens feed when standing over the feeder.

feeders: Food receptacles should be made of non-corrosive material that is easily cleaned minimizes spillage, prevents contamination with droppings and keeps food dry. The containers should be large enough for all the birds to comfortably eat at once or numerous enough to prevent competition or intimidation. Large heavy rubber feed buckets work nicely. Hanging dishes or feeders work as well and should be hung at about the level of the bird’s back. If dishes are outside the coop, they should be set under an overhang to keep them dry when it rains.

waterers: Water receptacles should be made of non-corrosive material that can be cleaned and disinfected with a solution of chlorine bleach, prevent contamination with droppings and is spill and leak proof. The containers should be large enough for all the birds to comfortably drink at once and hold enough water for all birds for an entire day. They should be slightly positioned higher than the feeder or far enough away to prevent contamination with food.

nestboxes- One nest box for every 3 hens. A 12”W x 12”D x 14”H is most versatile. Chickens prefer wooden nest boxes with covered opening for privacy placed on or as low to the floor as possible. If set higher they require a perch in front of the opening. They should be filled with 2-4 inches of straw. litter or grass. They prefer to nest in the South East corner of the structure whenever possible.

PEN: *The fenced area surrounding the coop that provides secure access to exercise, sunlight, earth and vegetation and is freely available to the birds when they are unsupervised. It is constructed to prevent the bird’s escape and prevents entry by intruders/predators.*

Construction & Materials – Kennel pens can be purchased ready made or in kits, or built from scratch. Local building codes should be followed to prevent damage from snow, wind, etc. Temperament and social structures of flock should be taken into account, and partitions should be available for birds who are sick, injured or lower in the pecking order.

Required features:

size: 10 sq. ft of floor space minimum per bird (an area 3 ft. x 3.3 ft per bird) is required so 4 birds will need floor space of at least 6 feet x 7 feet. If the coop is adjacent to the pen at least a 6 x 12 foot space in a yard is needed. If the coop is elevated 2 feet so the chickens can use the space underneath, the coop and pen can occupy some but not all of the same footprint. If most of the pen is in deep shade all

of the time it would be conducive to unhealthy bacteria and fungal development. The pen should be high enough for you to stand up comfortably for cleaning, maintenance, capture and also allows for additional roosting.

substrate- Choose a well drained area. Substrate material for the pen should be clean, non-toxic, biodegradable, readily available, inexpensive and replaceable. Since it will become compacted from little feet and contaminated by concentrated droppings and parasites, it will need to be raked out and replaced frequently to reduce odor and fly activity. Play sand, leaves, municipal wood chips, sod and hard wearing ground cover work well.

metal fencing / predator control: The type of fencing depends on what the most likely predators are in your area. Dogs, rats, raccoons, hawks and coyotes are the most prevalent in city neighborhoods, but others include fox, mink, opossum, bobcats, snakes, weasels, ferrets, fisher and marten. Its best to build the strongest deterrents possible. Chain link panels or welded or woven fencing on a sturdy frame reinforced at the bottom with small mesh metal wire that prevents predators from tunneling under the fence will discourage most intruders. Regular inspection is key to security.

gate: A gate is needed for easy human access.

cover: Pen should be covered to keep birds in and predators out. The type of covering needed will depend on the type of predators. Covering part of the pen with a roof such as corrugated fiberglass can provide shade and rain shelter.

windbreak: Providing a wind and snow break will give the birds a protected area to be outdoors even in winter.

shade: Shade must be available and can be provided by vegetation or strategically placed materials.

dustbath: Taking a dust bath is the closest thing to heaven for a chicken. They derive pleasure and contentment by bathing in the sun and in loose dry soil depressions in the dirt which cleans their feathers and rids them of parasites. Birds will usually dig their own hole for dust baths. Keep the soil in the dust bath loose and add play sand if it is a heavy clay soil. Adding a little poultry dust, diatomaceous earth or wood ash increases the effectiveness of parasite control. Large heavy rubber feed buckets filled with play sand are a welcome addition to the indoor coop in the winter.

enrichment furnishings: There is nothing sadder than a barren pen when compared to the rich jungle environment chickens evolved in. Lots of large branches, stumps or platforms provide places to go and things to do and look natural and attractive in the pen. Include bushes, boxes or other objects to sit in or hide behind. Plant kale or other safe, edible vegetation around the outside of the pen for forage. Overcrowding, boredom and barren pens are the most common cause of behavior problems.

RANGE/ EXERCISE YARD: *The larger fenced area like a backyard that provides ample space for safe exercise, forage, sunlight, earth and vegetation that is regularly available to the birds when supervised.* For regular exercise, 174 sq. ft per bird (an area about 10 ft. x 17 ft per bird) is required. 4 birds will need access to a 40 ft. x 70 ft. fenced area in the yard. If there is no access to a larger Range/ exercise yard, 16 sq. ft. of floor space minimum per bird (an area 4 ft. x 4 ft per bird) in the pen must be provided.

fencing: 6 ft privacy fencing prevents or to discourage uninvited human and animal visitors. and promotes the safety and security of the birds and neighbors.

nontoxic plants: Chickens are inquisitive and voracious eaters of vegetation and many ornamental garden plants can be toxic to them . Learn which of your plants might be harmful and fence them off or better yet replace them with safe and nutritious plants.

security: Chickens are susceptible to theft, vandalism and predators and need to be securely shut in the coop at night. Security cameras, lights and baby monitors are also highly recommended deterrents.

PROVIDING GOOD CARE

FOOD / WATER

Fresh food and water are required daily and should be available at all times. Hay , grain and prepared feed should be fresh- less than one year old and free of mold, insects or other contaminants. Daily

intake should include: 60 % nutritionally balanced prepared feed appropriate for age of bird, 20% scratch (cracked corn, oats, black oil sunflower seeds, milo, barley) 20% fresh (nutritious foods and table scraps- Caution toxic: onion, avocados, chocolate) Supplements: oyster shell or limestone for calcium, granite grit for digestion, mineral salt or ground salt licks. Chickens drink 1-2 cups of water a day. Feed should be stored in rodent proof containers in a cool dry area inaccessible to animals. Stored feedbags should be rotated to ensure that feed is always fresh. Food that is uneaten or spilled should be removed from animal enclosures daily.

SOCIAL NEEDS Temperament and social structures of animals should be taken into account, and separate areas provided for incompatible birds.

VET CARE

Locate a veterinary clinic nearby that will see chickens before one is needed. preferably one that specializes in avian care. Chickens are welcome in increasing numbers of city clinics. Check vet backgrounds at <http://www.vetmed.state.mn.us/Default.aspx?tabid=803> Have an isolation area or roomy carrier and heating pad for sick or injured birds. Critical/emergency first aid supplies should be kept including roll gauze, gauze pads, tape, vet wrap, blood stop powder, antibiotic ointment, antibacterial scrub and solution, and bandage scissors.

SANITATION- Manure and wet bedding should be removed from coop and animal feeding and lounging areas daily. Thorough, complete cleaning of walls and perches, removal of all bedding, and disinfecting of coop and furnishings should be done at least once a year. Keeping shelter areas clean and dry will help prevent bacteria, fungi, insects, rodents, etc. Rodent levels will be minimized by keeping all feed in rodent proof containers and removing spilled or uneaten food promptly. Litter can be double bagged and disposed of as solid waste or composted but must be done in an area where chickens will not scratch for at least a year.

Housing animals in spacious, clean and relatively dust free environments will keep them healthy and will minimize human exposure to infectious disease.

Sources:

Poultry Your Way: A Guide to Management Alternatives for the Upper Midwest, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 2005
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Poultry Housing Considerations for Low Input Small Scale Producers, David Sullenberger, TimeWarrior Farm Chronicle Special Reports, Revision E, Fall, 2003
Building Chicken Coops: Storey Country Wisdom Bulletin A-224, Gail Damerow, 1999
Chicken Health Handbook, Gail Damerow, 1994

REQUIREMENTS FOR KEEPING CHICKENS

The Permit for keeping chickens and other domestic fowl is contingent on your meeting responsibilities to your neighbors and the birds. Our department so often sees animals in inappropriate settings. Before going further, please read the enclosed CHICKEN CARE SHEET. Consider the commitment needed with regard to the lifespan, cost, time, space, location, and other consequences of caring for chickens. Next, consider the kind of impact they may have on your neighborhood. You must provide sufficient control so that their presence will not disturb neighbors with property damage, activity, noise, odor or trespass. You must keep your property clean and maintained in a manner that prevents insect and rodent infestations. Finally, consider the birds themselves. Are you willing to assume a long term commitment to them? They must be provided with food, water shelter and veterinary care. They also need kindness and personal attention.

COOP: *The house, closed structure or enclosed room which provides shelter from cold, heat, wind, rain, snow and predators for protected roosting, nesting, feeding and watering space.*

size: 4 sq. feet interior floor space minimum per bird (an area 2 ft. x 2 ft. per bird).

access to electricity

floor: wood- 1 ft. off the ground, insulated / sealed or concrete

bedding: clean, absorbent, nontoxic, biodegradable and replaceable material

walls: varnished, treated or painted draft free double walls 1 1/2 inch insulation

roof: will not collect / hold heat, min. 1-1/2 inch insulation, insulating tar paper, inclined, vents

doors: 1 human-size, 1 bird door 0-2 ft. high, stable ramp, secure latch

windows: 1 square foot of window per 10 square foot of floor space

roosts: 1 1/2 diameter or greater, 18" from wall, 2 -3 feet off the floor.

climate control: heater, fan, ventilation to maintain temperature 32° min.- 85° max. F

light: full spectrum, windows and/or skylights, incandescent light or other to follow normal seasonal light cycles.

feeders/ waterers: non corrosive, clean, size and number sufficient, accessible for all birds

nestboxes- 1 per 3 hens, bedding

PEN: *The fenced area surrounding the coop that provides secure access to exercise, sunlight, earth and vegetation and is freely available to the birds when they are unsupervised. It is constructed to prevent the bird's escape and prevents entry by intruders/predators.*

size: 10 sq. ft of floor space minimum per bird (an area 3 ft. x 3.3 ft per bird)

substrate: well drained area; clean, nontoxic, biodegradable and replaceable matter

metal fencing and gate / predator control: sufficient to keep birds in/predators out

cover: sufficient to keep birds in/predators out

windbreak, shade, dustbath, enrichment furnishings (ie. branches, stumps or platforms bushes, boxes)

RANGE/ EXERCISE YARD: *The larger fenced area like a backyard that provides ample space for safe exercise, forage, sunlight, earth and vegetation that is regularly available to the birds when supervised.*

size: 174 sq. ft per bird (an area about 10 ft. x 17 ft per bird)

If no access to a larger Range/ Exercise Yard, pen must provide 16 sq. ft. of floor space minimum per bird (an area 4 ft. x 4 ft per bird)

fencing: 6 ft privacy fencing

FOOD / WATER: Fresh food and water daily, calcium supplement, grit, stored in rodent proof containers, uneaten / spilled removed daily.

SOCIAL: separate areas provided for incompatible birds.

VET CARE: designated veterinary clinic, isolation area

SANITATION- manure/wet bedding removed daily; clean / disinfect coop and furnishings annually. Soiled litter double bagged for solid waste or composted in an area inaccessible to chickens for at least a year.