

The Role of the Rooster

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The person who wishes to have a perfect poultry yard...must choose the cocks that are muscular, with a red crest, a short, full, pointed beak, grey or black eyes, light coloured red wattles, a variegated or gold-coloured neck, the inside of the thighs hairy, short legs, long claws, large tail, close pinions; which are also erect and crow often, pertinacious in flight, and which not only do not fear the animals, which are hurtful to the hens, but which fight for them.—Owen 1800



The role of the rooster in animal husbandry has a long and illustrious history from the guardian of the back yard flock to the fighting cocks center ring. What role they play now, in the agro ecosystem of the small farm, is commonly up for debate. While the male of the species *Gallus domesticus* is undeniably well suited to be raised and fattened as a hybrid meat bird (for example the Cornish X or Kosher King) its place within the laying breeds is unclear. In the past century, when all chickens were considered dual purpose, the male Rhode Island Reds and Barred Plymouth Rocks were raised as meat birds while the hens went on to egg-laying duties. In recent times, however, as hybrid layers are developed for higher production and lower body weight, the usefulness of the cockerels has declined. It is now common for hatcheries to simply discard all male chicks of the White Leghorn breed and others. This highly refined, super lightweight laying machine is designed for one purpose only; the males are superfluous to the industry. This notion seems inherently counter intuitive to good animal husbandry which looks to ensure the healthy productive lives of all farm animals regardless of their eventual fate. On a smaller scale, what role do the roosters hold in small commercial laying flocks or back yard hobby flocks? Small flock owners tend to choose less commercial breeds that have larger, meatier cockerels that might be raised for the table. The rise in popularity of brown egg breeds, particularly for small organic or free-range flocks, may increase the use of the male for something other than garbage.

Aristotle called the rooster *alektora* and sang its praises along with the likes of Theocritus, Pliny, Varro, and Aldrovandi (Lind 1963). The rooster holds a time-honored place in the small flock, protecting the hens, announcing the day, and ensuring the next generation. He still holds this place on many farms and struts his stuff with most back yard flocks. It seems only right and good for him to be there. But what is his real purpose on our farms? How does he benefit the hens, the flock, or the farm on the whole? I never really pondered this role until I was forced to assume it in a very strange way.

On our farm we raise up batches of 400-500 layer chicks each spring and fall to sell as pullets and replace our own retired layers. Although we order only females (the males of this breed are sometimes used for fryers) there is always a small margin of error with the sexing. This usually amounts to 1% of the flock being

cockerels. We make no effort to remove these cockerels; they grow up with the pullets and go on to live in the layer house. With so many hens to service the cockerels usually keep busy and don't cause any trouble. Also, since we turn over our flock every 18 months they never attained enough maturity to become aggressive. Although the cockerels didn't seem to interfere with flock production or health, they didn't seem to benefit it either. Or so I thought. Our currently producing flock of Red Sex-Links was shipped as chicks with no cockerels. We thought perhaps this was a benefit, four or five extra pullets, but we were wrong. Growing up without cockerels present, I believe the pullets came to see us as the dominant cockerels. The sexual response of a hen to rooster largely involves crouching when the cock puts his foot on her back in preparation for

mating (Damerow 1994). Birds that are lowest in the pecking order will crouch when simply approached by the rooster. This is precisely what our flock began to do. Now I've had the occasional hen that will crouch when you walk by, as if inviting a pet, but these are 400 hens throwing themselves to the ground when we approach. Feeding becomes a logistical nightmare as each step endangers the safety of a poor confused hen prepared for her amour. If we do tread upon their backs, upon release they stand and ruffle their feathers in apparent satisfaction. It's all very inconvenient and a little disturbing socially. In an attempt to remedy the situation I moved a loose rooster from the barn into the henhouse. I assumed he'd be welcomed with open wings, and much crouching. Instead, however, this flock of socially and sexually confused hens pecked him into pathetic submission and ostracized him into living under the nest boxes. I've never heard him crow, the hens have completely emasculated him. I don't know if large cockerel-free laying operations have this problem, but our new flock due to lay this spring has five young cockerels in residence and I intend to keep them.

The above experience aside, there are also good reasons not to keep roosters in the flock, particularly the small flock. Roosters are not necessary for the production of eggs and hens do not lay better if one is present (Thear 1999). In fact, production can go down if hens are injured during mating. The rooster's spurs and claws damage backs and he commonly pulls out head feathers while trying to hold on. Hens low in the pecking order are more likely to submit to breeding and therefore suffer more broken feathers and scratching (Damerow 1994). The smaller the flock, the more likely these subordinate hens will suffer injuries from an aggressive rooster. Aldrovandi noted in 1600 that "*the lustfulness of the rooster is recognized not only from the great frequency with*

which he copulates with his own wives but even more from the fact that if the hens are gone he does not in the slightest refrain from the males but in the middle of the barnyard he mounts the one who has entered it most recently. (Lind 1963)” This “lustful” aggression is not limited to chickens. I have had roosters consistently harass uninterested ducks and of course small children. Children appreciate neither the aggression nor the amorous attentions of any rooster. The most common reason for a rooster to see the stew pot is his attacks on children.

If a rooster is kept in the small flock, considerations must be made for the hens. I usually do not recommend keeping a rooster unless there are at least ten hens or they will get more male attention than they might like. If fertile eggs are hoped for this is also a good number for breeding purposes (Thear 1999). In my experience, breed choice is also an important consideration. Some breeds just seem to have more aggressive roosters. This seems particularly true of Barred Plymouth Rocks, Aracaunas, and Old English Bantams. Some of the larger breeds like Cochins and Brahmas can be mellower. The only roosters we keep loose on the farm are Silkies. These sociable creatures can usually be trusted not to attack children. We have, however, had the occasional nasty Silkie rooster who had to hit the road for bad behavior. If the rooster will be kept for many years or is a particularly aggressive breed one might consider trimming his spurs. Be careful to only blunt the ends or they may bleed (Thear 1999).

“Although there is thus a great deal of usefulness for mankind in the crowing of the rooster, as I have said, there still are those who, whenever they hear him crow, wish he were at the devil. Of course these are lazy and indolent men who love only sleep and food... (Lind 1963)” The rooster’s song is undoubtedly what limits his existence in towns and neighborhoods, at least in this country.

I am commonly asked if there is any way to mute the rooster’s crow, typically by those who wish to keep poultry in town. There is of course no kind way to thwart his musical talents. Castrated roosters, or *capons*, cease to crow, but they also cease to be roosters. Shutting roosters in windowless coops for the night may lessen his crowing or at least muffle the sound, but he will undoubtedly let out a hearty song once you release him.

Of all the intact male animals on the farm, roosters are probably the least dangerous, but even they require special consideration. Social structure may require them while modern domestication has rendered them merely peripheral for egg production. Their role in the agro ecosystem of the small farm may be more traditional than practical, but it persists. Aristotle’s *alektora* reigns on small farms throughout this country despite, or even because of, the continuing push to the mono cropping and mono sexing of the modern factory farm.

Glossary

Agro ecosystem. The whole farm system including, but not limited to: wild and domestic plants, wild and domestic animals, topography, weather, structures, waterways, and humans.

Capon. A castrated male chicken.

Cockerel. A male chicken under 1 year of age.

Hen. A female chicken over 1 year of age.

Pullet. A female chicken under 1 year of age.

Rooster. A male chicken over 1 year of age.

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