By Melanie Adcock, D.V.M.

Chickens—our language is filled with references to their behavior. People are called “chickens” when afraid, “henpecked” when nagged, and our problems are said to “come home to roost.” But despite their prominence in our language, chickens have little going for them in the public eye.

Chickens don’t gaze at us soulfully or wriggle with joy; they express emotions more subtly, through a rich variety of calls and postures. To a casual observer, their movements can appear mechanical, even comical. Because of chickens’ apparent lack of similarity to companion animals, it can be hard to relate to the suffering of a laying hen crowded into a wire cage, unable to spread her wings. But if people knew more about the true nature of chickens, I think we would see a resounding public outcry over their mistreatment on factory farms. Their future depends on new public appreciation of the hen: she is not unlovable or emotionless, but a thinking, sensitive, and complex creature.

A chicken can recognize and remember about 100 other chickens. Chickens enjoy playing with toys, preferring balls with faces over plain balls. Some chickens like listening to classical music (Vivaldi, in particular) while others cuddle up to red mittens for comfort. Knocking on the door before entering a small henhouse will keep hens from being startled by a visitor. These are but a few examples of the interesting nature of laying hens.

The chicken was brought to America by the Pilgrims. Descended from the red jungle fowl of Southeast Asia, the modern laying hen is very similar to her ancestors in general behavior. When allowed to roam freely, hens are extremely active during the day—walking, running, flying, exploring, and searching for food. At night they roost together, preferring to perch high off the ground. Their reputation as “chickens” may be due to their response to predators—running or flying away when disturbed, sometimes freezing or crouching.

Chickens are inquisitive animals and will closely investigate anything new in their environment. Hens like to work for their food. Even if food is readily available, hens choose to spend a large part of their day exploring for food and scratching and pecking at the ground.

Chickens are very social animals and form tight social groups. Groups of birds tend to dust-bathe (a grooming behavior) and eat together.

A massive, four-tier house for laying hens is typical of today’s intensive-confinement battery-cage operations. Newly hatched chicks begin life crowded in incubator cases. The females are destined for lives as assembly-line egg-laying machines; the males are killed.
Together. They communicate with each other through visual displays and calls. The baby chick begins communicating while still inside the egg, responding with positive temperature, and pain. They also have evidence behavior changes suggestive of not only short-term but also long-term memory. The severed nerve endings in the beak develop into abnormal nervous tissue, and the beak never heals properly. A hen’s nesting desire is so strong that she will go without food and water to be allowed to use a nest when she’s ready to lay. Deprived of nests, hens in battery cages escape anxiously and repeatedly to attempt to escape to two or four hours prior to laying an egg. Without privacy or nests, hens may lay their eggs on the sloping wire floor on which they are forced to stand. These birds are bred to be egg-laying machines, continuing to lay normally even when severely injured. They typically lay 230 to 280 eggs a year.

Hens suffer foot and feather damage from poorly designed wire cages unsuited to their needs. The wire floor doesn’t allow dust-bathing, or scratching, cocking at the ground, and the cramped quarters do not even permit normal preening. The complete lack of exercise, coupled with the demands of high egg production, causes bone weakness, predisposing the hens to broken bones.

About 20 percent of laying hens are subjected to forced molting. Typically food is withheld for up to twelve days (water is usually withheld for one to three days). This shock treatment causes almost all the birds to molt rapidly at the same time, which is not normal for hens in the natural pace, so that, when they recover, their productive lifetime will have been extended.

Considered “spent” after twelve to twenty-four months in battery cages, hens are pulled out of their cages, stuffed into crates, and sent to slaughter. Laying hens suffer excruciatingly high rates of death and injury during this ordeal. Many are transported great distances in open (uncovered) trucks, completely exposed to the elements and deprived of food and water. During handling and transport, large numbers of hens (as many as 10 percent in one study) have their weakened bones broken.

The final act of cruelty to the hens is slaughtering them without prior stunning to render them unconscious. The battery cage is the cause of this cruelty, as well: the hens’ weakened bones would fracture during stunning. Fully conscious, hens are shackled upside down on a conveyor and their throats are cut by an automated knife. Then they are dropped into a scalding tank. The birds are supposedly dead when they go into the scalding tanks, but a European study, 30 percent of chickens were still alive when they were dropped into the tanks.

The flesh from “spent” laying hens is so bruised and damaged that it can be used only for foods such as soup, pet pigs, or pet food. These hens endure extreme fear, abusive handling, open transport, and broken bones only to be sold for as little as twenty-five cents each.

Ironically, the first time battery-caged hens are able to fling their wings is when they struggle against rough handling as they are transported to the slaughterhouse. The first time they experience the outdoors is when they are sent to slaughter in open trucks. As future egg layers, female baby chicks are spared from death. Male baby chicks, having no value to the egg industry, are gassed, ground up, or suffocated. But at least they do not have to suffer life in a battery cage.

Most of us grow up with images of barnyards where hens run about freely, happily clucking and pecking at the ground, and laying their eggs in straw-filled nests. Why isn’t the reality of the battery cage replaced in advertising or in children’s books? The obvious answer is that showing us the reality of the hens’ life would decrease egg sales. Consumers are misled by idyllic barnyard scenes with hens brooding in nests and chicks chirping behind their attentive mothers. Just as objectionable are the ads portraying chickens as dumb—far from accurate or appreciative of the unique and complex behaviors chickens display.

The happy barnyard hen is not the only myth being perpetuated. America cherishes her heritage of farm families and wants to keep farmers and ranchers on the land. But in the last twelve years, 80 percent of U.S. egg producers have been driven out of business. This loss of farmers has paralleled the increase in the number of producers keeping more than a million birds, all in battery cages. Confining hens to the battery cage is not the only cruelty inflicted in the poultry industry. The life of a poultry-processing worker is also one of misery. The line workers are usually treated with such brutality that many workers are forced to perform a repetitive motion on every other bird, one motion every two seconds! One in three workers suffer severe to extreme pain from musculoskeletal disorders, and every year 28,000 people lose their jobs or become disabled due to work-related injuries.

Our country is not only losing its independent family farmers, but the poultry industry is also treating people and animals like mere machines to be used until they are “spent.” It’s time to hold the industry accountable for its practices. We, the consumers, are the key. How we spend our money at the grocery store directly influences how food is made and how animals are raised. Every time you reach for a carton of eggs from battery-caged hens, you are telling the grocer and the egg industry that you accept that product and the current treatment of laying hens. Instead for just pennies more a day, you can improve the lives of millions of laying hens by picking up a carton of eggs from more humanely raised, uncaged hens. Once the industry becomes aware of consumers’ concern for hens and the demand for eggs from uncaged birds, it will begin to buy from farmers who are producing eggs more humanely. Other farmers will be able to release their birds from cages and begin raising free-roaming birds.

Today these more humanely produced foods are not readily available in convenient form and are not commonly found in grocery stores. To confront this problem, the HSUS is mounting an “egg effort” in several major cities. We are joining forces with consumer, environmental, farmer, and animal-protection groups in each city to bring eggs from uncaged hens into specialty stores and urge consumers to support the more humane egg farmers. At the same time, we will help consumers learn about the cruelties endured by battery-caged hens and how each of us can help give them a better life. After some 8,000 years of domestication and service to his mankind, they deserve nothing less.

Our efforts to empower consumers to improve the lives of laying hens are part of a new HSUS nationwide campaign asking consumers to “shop with compassion.” Because the battery cage is one of the most inhumane systems for raising animals, it is the first target of our campaign. We urge consumers not to buy any animal products such as eggs, chicken, and pork raised in battery cages and to urge users to switch to eggs from free-roaming birds.

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