BY MELANIE ADCOCK, D.V.M.

Chicken—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. New 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 chirps to the mother's pattering as she incu-
bates the egg. Once hatched, the chick "imprints" on the mother hen, maintaining a permanent, close relationship with the
hen as she/m he matures.

Nesting is extremely important to laying hens. They prefer to lay their eggs in a pri-
ivate nest, and they perform an elaborate se-
quence of behaviors while searching for a
nest site, building the nest, and laying eggs.

Laying hens have a well-developed ner-
vous system and are sensitive to touch,
temperature, and pain. They also have ex-
cellent vision and a color range similar
to that seen by humans.

It is hard to imagine less appropriate
housing for the highly social, complex,
and active laying hen than "battery cages.
These cages, made entirely of wire, are so
small and cramped that the hens cannot
even spread their wings. About 98 percent
of all eggs sold in supermarkets come
from humane egg-production systems.

The obvious answer is that showing us
hens laying eggs is less appropriate,
while brooding in hay is more fitting.

The happy barnyard hen is not the only
myth being perpetuated. America cherishes
the groundhog scene with hens brooding in
the barnyard, and laying their eggs in straw-
filled nests. Why isn’t the reality of the
battery cage replaced in advertising in
or children’s books?”

The answer is that the battery cage
is designed to confine the hens and
prevent them from moving around.

Most of us grow up with images of
barnyards where hens run about freely,
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