

UNDERSTANDING ROOSTER BEHAVIOR and ROOSTER SOCIALIZATION

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Dedicated to Bing, who taught me what a true friend a rooster can be.

The Inconvenient Truth

Roosters are the most cruelly treated sex of the most cruelly treated species on earth. Since they are of no value in the production of eggs, a quarter billion male chicks (roosters) a year are disposed of at the hatchery. Males, 50% of the chicks hatched by hatcheries and commercial egg breeding facilities, are killed as soon as their sex is determined at a day or two day old. The unwanted males and deformed females are suffocated in the garbage or macerated (ground up alive) for fertilizer or feed or they are sold for meat production. Only hens are wanted for their eggs. There are no laws to protect the chicks from any cost-efficient (read: cruel) method of disposal the producer chooses. Poultry is exempt from humane slaughter laws. At a facility like McMurray's Hatchery, this amounts to 80,000 chicks per week, 40,000 of them who never see the light of their second day.

Rooster Motivation

Their mission is to Protect and Serve. Understanding and appreciating rooster behavior is an accomplishment and a necessity. The reputation pinned on roosters for being "aggressive" or "mean" is really a failure on the human's part to understand and respect the purpose of that natural behavior. Often, we instead react as if the rooster were human and respond in a way that simply escalates the misunderstanding and makes a bad situation worse.

Many people choose to have hens only in companion flocks. That's a shame-gender becomes a death sentence for 50 percent of the chickens hatched, and the hens are deprived of 50 percent of the social interaction their instincts were evolved to respond to. When there's no rooster around hens, you miss a huge part of the joy that comes from understanding chickens. You miss watching the rooster look out for his hens, calling them to delicious food, watching the the boys show off for the girls, girls flirt with the boys, look to them out for security, and clever avoidance tactics when they are not "in the mood". You miss learning how the roosters and hens manage their relationships between each other and with the other sex. The behavior differences are so dramatic between the sexes they sometimes seem almost

different species.

Some people even choose to have only roosters. Some sanctuaries have as many as 100 roosters in bachelor flocks. Bachelor flocks, while not providing for a completely natural life experience for the boys, is not a completely unnatural existence either. Studies have shown that the males in wild flocks spend a significant amount of time hanging out with each other apart from the hens. Separate but adjacent areas for hens and roosters is a good way to provide for many of the social needs of the birds while eliminating some of the problems associated with excessive mounting of the females and fighting between the males. Even though the hens are fully visible through barrier fencing, the roosters can live quite amicably with each other. It is only when the males have the opportunity for physical contact with the females that competitive fighting occurs.

Societal Structure

Animals who live in communities operate under a distinct societal structure and chickens are no exception. There's the Alpha Male who is boss. He enjoys first position in everything from liberties with the hens to fighting oncomers, to "leading the pack" and settling disputes in the flock. The descending hierarchy places each rooster in his own distinct position. A Beta male will sometimes share duties with the Alpha, but the Beta has to be careful not to overstep his boundaries. If the Alpha Male takes exception, the Beta Male will receive a well placed reminder. There is also an Alpha and Beta Hen and a place for each in that hierarchy .

Flock Dynamics

The societal structure in the coop doesn't remain the same forever and is challenged all the time. This may result in an all out battle, but seldom does it go that far. The Alpha Male consistently reminds the Beta and all his subordinates who is boss. He does this a number of ways. They include anything from a good, old-fashioned beating, a peck on the backside, or just a posturing where the Boss will put himself between the subordinate and whatever the subordinates' intentions were. The Alpha will often intervene when the Beta is mating with one of the hens. When he arrives at the scene, the Beta will yield, retreat, or take a beating. The Alpha is always vigilant and this is the behavior you as the Alpha Alpha, need to emulate. Authority needs to be reinforced and reasserted constantly or the structure will fall apart.

New Management

When an Alpha Male ages, he'll eventually be replaced. This can happen through battle or just by tiring of his duties. When the Alpha is replaced by a younger male, the hierarchy will be reconfigured. Once the Alpha yields, he will be challenged by every other flock member and can end up low man in the coop. This does not necessarily mean physical confrontations. When the Alpha decides to submit, he's been beaten psychologically and seems so devastated that he's unwilling to contest any of the birds for anything and will avoid confrontation at all costs. If the Alpha is replaced because he's injured or sick, when recovered, he will reclaim his Alpha position.

Changeability and Adaptations

A flock's societal interactions are every bit as diverse as ours. The birds feel, care, protect, watch, learn, remember and hurt. They don't hide their emotions well. They act on them outwardly and immediately. They show their emotions on the surface constantly. They act, reassess, act and reassess driven by necessity, survival, and the pleasure, comfort and security of the flock.

National Defense

Chickens interact with the world as a flock and depend on each other for security in numbers. Their vocal and physical communication is extremely precise- a different call for a ground predator or an airborne one. A specific chortle announcing good food. A rumbling growl that boasts of a good nest found. The erect posture of an stretched neck and extended legs communicate imminent danger. Raised hackles are for settling disputes and confronting predators. Dropped wings and crouched posture hears the flock to safety. The flock responds to those signals and in the event of a direct threat to the flock, silently takes cover as directed. If it is a minor alert the hens may barely look up from their foraging. The Alpha and Beta will place themselves in front of the flock to fend off a predator and will often lose their lives doing so.

OOPS its a Rooster

If you have discovered that you have a rooster and your city prohibits them, you deserve the right to keep him. Educate your city council representative that for every laying hen there is a dead or abandoned rooster. Your council representative needs to hear from YOU!

- Tell your story of how you came to have your chicks and that you have come to love them regardless of their sex. You want to fulfill your responsibility to the bird by continuing to provide a home and by changing your city's policy.

- For every laying hen there is a rooster killed or abandoned either at the hatchery or at their destination once their sex is known.
- Cities that allow hens but prohibit roosters are responsible for the death or abandonment of 50% of the chickens brought into their city. A prohibition of one sex would never be acceptable policy for any other species of companion animal.
- The sex of the birds can't be determined until they are 4-6 months old so the bird is already a valued family member.
- Both Minneapolis and St. Paul animal control professionals have indicated they would support lifting the restrictions if the public demands it.
- Prohibitions on roosters have no fact based justification and discourages people from accepting responsibility for all the males- 50 % of all eggs hatched- winding up in cities and towns. If chickens are to be allowed in a community, both sexes need to be allowed equally.
- Roosters make wonderful companions.

See our Facebook album [2014 Tour of Chicken Run Rescue](#) for ideas on how to create a beautiful and safe place where the birds can have separate but equally satisfying spaces.

- Roosters protect hens from predators, act as peacekeepers in flock disputes, find food for the hens.
- The recent fad of having chickens and other domestic fowl has overwhelmed rescue organizations with requests from people wanting to find homes for chickens, especially roosters, who are no longer wanted, strayed or abandoned. Rooster bans only add to the tragedy.
- Cockfighting is a felony and is conducted in secret. Cockfighters do not get chicken permits.
- There is an easy way to prevent unwanted offspring if there is a rooster present- simply collect the eggs daily. Millions of unwanted dogs and cats are euthanized every year- if only preventing unwanted offspring was as easy as with chickens!

- There are simple ways to minimize noise from crowing roosters with adjustments in housing and daytime schedule.

When CRR was located in Minneapolis, many roosters lived there in multiples for 16 years and there was never a single complaint from neighbors. We also learned that hens are far noisier than roosters due to the discomfort of egg laying and older hens often crow. CRR is happy to coach on socialization and behavior and ways to mitigate any noise issues.

- If your city permits roosters, accept your responsibility for these boys and get the permit if required.

- If your city does not permit roosters, change it by educating your local officials and advocate for the roosters. Crowing of roosters should be handled like any other noise complaint like barking dogs, music, machinery, traffic noise or any other disturbance that a well-written noise ordinance can regulate.

This is an example of a reasonably worded noise ordinance:

Sec. 6-11. - Disturbing noises.

(a) The owner or keeper of an animal shall not allow such animal to make noise so as to cause unreasonable annoyance, disturbance or discomfort to any person.

(b) It shall be a violation of this section if:

(1) The noise can be heard from a location outside of the building or property where the animal is being kept and at a distance of at least 100 feet from such property; and

(2) The noise occurs repeatedly over a period of time of at least five minutes, during which the lapse of time between each animal noise is 30 seconds or less, or at least 20 minutes where the lapse of time between such noises is five minutes or less.

(c) The noise described in subsection (b) of this section is not a violation if it occurs due to harassment or injury to the animal from someone or something other than the owner or keeper of the animal, or due to a trespass upon the property where the animal is located. This subsection (c) shall not be an element of the offense, but rather an affirmative defense.

Examples of decibel levels of common sounds:

Human conversation 50 – 65 dB at one foot from source, 26 – 42 dB at 15 feet away.

Crowing Rooster 66-83 dB at one foot from source, 43 – 60 dB at 15 feet

away.

Barking dog 60 – 110 dB at one foot from source, 37 – 87 dB at 15 feet away.

Automobile traffic 80 – 84 dB at one foot from source, 56 – 60 dB at 15 feet away.

Lawn mower 85-90 dB at one foot from source, 61 – 67 dB at 15 feet away.

Power tool (chain saw, leaf blower, weed whacker) 110 – 120 dB at one foot from source, 87 - 96 dB at 15 feet away.

<http://www.soundbytes.com/page/SB/CTGY/decibel-levels>

https://www.ehow.com/info_8224249_decibel-levels-common-things.html

Other species of companion birds are by far louder and not banned:

Macaw- 105 decibels

Moluccan cockatoo- 135 decibels

Nanday conure- 155 decibels

Mealy amazon- 124 decibels

Quaker parrot-113 decibels

Mustached parakeet- 111 decibels

Mitred conure- 100 decibels

It is nearly impossible to find good permanent homes for roosters. National adoption websites are flooded with homeless roosters. As nature would have it, roosters are 50% of the chickens hatched. Those who promote breeding or buying chickens from hatcheries or breeders need to be honest about what happens to the ones no one wants- day old male chicks are ground up alive or sold to unsuspecting customers who don't know the sex till the bird reaches 4-5 months old. If your rooster is taken to a feed store he will be warehoused in hell with many others till he's shipped to slaughter.

Roosters are wonderful companions. Learn how to enjoy living with them. They can be socialized much like dogs and horses. If too many roosters is the issue, you might consider providing a separate (but spacious) area for them as a bachelor flock. They can cohabitate quite happily if the competition for the females is taken out of the dynamics.

Summary

The key to having a happy fulfilling relationship with roosters is to be able to communicate on their terms and assume the role of Alpha Alpha. Daily physical contact is essential with consistent, predictable behavior allows them to know, understand and trust you. Anyone who has a good understanding of horses

and dogs can apply some of the same training and behavior modification strategies. Be creative and have fun.

Tips to reinforce your Alpha role

- Establish a treat ritual- we use a shiny metal bowl that is a visual cue that brings them running with glee. This can be very helpful if there is a need to gather the birds up quickly in bad weather or predator danger.
- Hand feed, make a game of the activity. Chickens love to jump in the air for treats. A shared activity makes you a flock member.
- Let the hens feed first, then allow the roosters to join.
- Reassert your Alpha Alpha at every opportunity. Intervene if a rooster is confronting another rooster, pick him up and carry him or place him in a distracting situation that he will have to reason his way out of (like setting him down on a low perch or in tall grass. He will forget the dominant behavior he was engaged in.

If a rooster mounts a hen , interrupt it. Place yourself deliberately between him and the hen and continue to counter each move he makes.

- Be affectionate with him- pick him up, sing to him talk to him, carry him around and show him things, stroke his wattle and comb, scratch his ears. If you nuzzle his comb, do so from the side- never facing him. His instinctive behavior to peck challenge will overwhelm him. Pat him firmly on the wings while holding him. Pat him on the butt when you sit him down. Don't assume a submissive lower posture with him. His instinctive behavior to challenge or dominate you will overwhelm his affection for you. This reinforces your relationship of trust and understanding and strengthens your bond with your birds.

- Be a student of nature and spend time observing behaviors and what they mean:

Dancing and the dragging wing is a courting/herding/ dominance/testing gesture. Acknowledge, praise and appreciate the splendid performance but follow that by picking him up and reasserting your authority.

If he lunges or tries to spur you DO NOT react. NEVER strike back. Become a

"tree". Stand still and then move slowly to pick him up and carry him to a place where you can secure him till he has calmed down or hold him in your arms. Do not put him down in an agitated state- wait till his pupils have normalized and his heart rate has slowed.

Socializing new roosters-

- identify favorite food
- coax to take by hand
- sit in small enclosed area with favorite treats same time every day
- hand feed bringing closer, reach out to stroke back lightly while eating, gradually keeping hand on back a bit longer
- when picking up- place hand on back and press downward gently till the bird stops, gently pick up and hold, talk soothingly
- if picking up a rooster in mid-tantrum, balance his keel in the palm of your hand and hold your arm out away from your body. He will be more focused on keeping his balance than pecking at you
- set down and immediately pick up again- repeat 20 times, varying where bird is set down and picked up
- Sit down while holding bird on lap and release grip momentarily, gradually extend time to let bird stand on lap of free will
- when setting bird down, place arm or hand under feet and let them step off to another surface or place feet directly on ground before letting go

ROOSTER SOCIALIZATION PROGRAM-

These are tips on socializing an adult rooster who has been mistreated and developed a distrust for humans.

Relax and have fun. Dog training techniques are very successful with roosters- be creative.

PREPARATION

- Read "Understanding Rooster Behavior"
- Wear heavy garden gloves, shirt, pants and shoes- rubber muck boots work really well. If you are well protected you will be brave and confident and in charge. This is what a rooster understands. You won't need this get up once you two have established that you are the Alpha Rooster and he will be happy to know that someone is in charge.

- Keep raisins or bread in your pocket for impromptu treats. Hand feed special treats (raisins, romaine or bread work great) from a recognizable bowl (see pic- my birds know the Shiny Bowl Cafe and come running when they see it).

-Keep socializing the boy on a DAILY basis. You will be richly rewarded with very devoted rooster-dog. If working with a group of roosters, Start with the most dominant one if possible- the others will take cues from him.

- Work with rooster alone in a small enclosed area. Chasing him around adds a confusing element to the sessions. A small room or inside the coop or a walk-in cage that you can stand and move easily in would be best.

- Define his territory. A spacious outdoor pen attached to a comfortable, secure coop or designated structure will define the areas where he and the rest of the flock will feel safe and in control. Once they know where the food and safe night roosting is, they will return to it freely. When there are visitors, there will be a secure and familiar place for them to be out of harms way. If there is no territory defined, he will feel the need to defend the entire property. A well designed predator proof pen and coop area will protect the birds from predators as well.

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-Learn how to read their body language for clues of when they may be plotting a heist. Watch for a sidelong "sizing up" glance at you, erect posture, wing-dip sideways rooster dance, circling behind you. If they have sudden hormone surges that sometimes make them nippy, stay calm and wait it out. Take control of the situation- they will respect you for it.

-As their spurs develop, keep the sharp points blunted with dog nail clippers (watch out for the quick- have stiptic handy)

LESSON PLAN

- Spend 5 minutes or so a few tmes a day just sitting or standing quietly in the same small space with the rooster.

-Avoid sessions in early morning or dusk. Testosterone peaks at these times and bird will be more agitated and wary.

- Once he gets used to this, you can start building on the relationship.

- Raisins, grapes or peanuts are a favorite treat- bring them in a shiny bowl- the birds will get used to this visual clue that treats are coming.

- Drop some treats on the ground. Once rooster discovers he likes them, offer them one at a time from finger tips. Once he starts to take them from finger tips, raise your hand high enough that rooster will have to jump up 6 inches or so to get it. They realize this is a fun game and it becomes a shared activity.

- Start by offering the treats from an open hand. Once rooster starts to take them from open hand, gently reach out and place both hands over rooster's wings and pick him up.

- Practice picking up and putting rooster down gently so he will understand that nothing bad is going to happen when he is picked up.

- Pick up and hold/carry/pet at least 2 times a day. Stroke wattles and scratch ears, preen incoming feathers. Sing and talk to them. This calms you down as well as them.

- When charged:

Best response- BE A TREE- stand still, calmly pick him up and hold them gently but securely, talk or sing, till you feel his heart rate slow down and his pupils normalize. I walk them around a bit and show them scenery to help them refocus.

Worst response- run away, swing weapon or kick at them- this just excites them more. Think of the rooster as a mirror- whatever you do he will match. Positive reinforcement is best.

- For seasonal outbursts (peak breeding season) keep a spray bottle of water handy for a ONE quick stream in the face. Use it VERY judiciously or it will lose its effectiveness. My guys know the sight of it and if they were thinking of being naughty, they reconsider when they see it.

(Note- the Wing Dip Dance can be an expression of joy- my beloved Bing

Bong comes and performs if for me every time he greets me- much like when my dog Marco runs wagging and rubbing on my leg.

At some point, rooster will start to follow you around like a dog. He may tug at you pantleg for treats or attention. Pick him up, patt him on his shoulders and tell him how handsome he is and then set him down. By this point he will think you are fun and interesting and want to hang out with you instead of chasing you off.