

# Introducing the Chicken

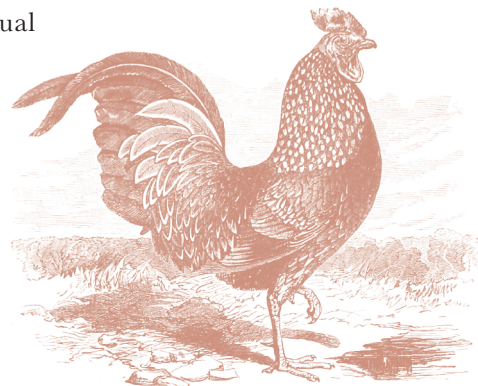
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**T**he chickens of today are descended from the jungle fowl of Southeast Asia. The process of domestication probably began almost 10,000 years ago, when humans started to take pleasure in the bloodthirsty spectacle of cockfighting. Champion fighters were no doubt encouraged to stay close to the human settlement—along with the groups of hens that naturally accompanied them.

For these early chickens, this arrangement would have worked to their advantage; they would have been afforded some protection against their natural predators, and given access to food scraps, grain, and the assorted invertebrates that live in and around a settlement. And, as social birds, they would have been likely to respond well to their new-found “keepers,” all the while becoming better adapted to the human environment with each generation.

Our ancestors, too, must have gradually come to notice how efficiently chickens converted their food sources into eggs and meat. Over time, chickens, therefore, became part of the scenery and, indeed, part of the culture—with evidence suggesting that they soon became used for spiritual and medicinal purposes. Over the next few thousand years, humans began to congregate in ever greater numbers in established locations, and chickens would probably have been found living closely among them.

By and large, they were seen simply as a handy but casual source of meat and eggs, with only the ancient Romans (in typically enterprising fashion) applying any kind of industrialized approach to rearing them as a food source. However, true industrialized chicken farming—and breeding—would not begin until the middle of the twentieth century.



**Right** *Chickens have been part of the lives of humans for thousands of years.*









## A REWARDING SPECIES

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With the advent of industrialized farming, the relationship between humans and chickens has changed, but the idea of the backyard chicken still has its attractions. Some people keep fowl for the same reason that others enjoy growing flowers and vegetables in their garden—for the simple pleasure of seeing modest reward for honest toil. And when it comes to the yard, chickens are only too happy to provide extra benefits; they peck away at common pests, such as ticks, ants, caterpillars, snails, and slugs (and the occasional prized cabbage or lettuce—no-one said they were perfect), and they also provide an organic, high-nitrogen fertilizer on a daily, often hourly, basis, which is well worth adding to your compost or mulch.

Almost all owners enjoy cooking and eating freshly harvested chicken eggs. This is not just because they taste better than intensively farmed alternatives—although they really do—but because there is a satisfaction in knowing just where your food has come from. This stands in stark contrast to the guilt people often feel after eating cheaper chicken or eggs from intensive farming systems, where poor welfare and suffering can be commonplace. In an age where we have become geographically and psychologically distanced from our food, there is something to be said for locally grown produce—and you cannot get more local than your own backyard.

Other keepers of chickens revel in the everyday interaction with another species, as people do with other kinds of pet or livestock. Chickens are undeniably rewarding company: they recognize and respond to their keepers; they indulge in all kinds of fascinating behavior; and they bring color and movement to your backyard. They also serve to teach children about the cycle of life, and about the effort and responsibility required to get food from the land.



## ABOUT THIS BOOK

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This book is for anyone interested in chickens, whether you keep some already or whether you are thinking about it. It treats chickens not simply as producers of meat and eggs but as fascinating creatures in their own right. In the first four chapters, you will discover all that science can tell us about the origins, anatomy, behavior, and capabilities of modern domesticated chickens. And in the fifth, you will find an introduction to the many breeds of chicken that exist in all their richness and variety. By the time you finish this book, you will be able to understand a great deal more about how these amazing birds live and how you can help them thrive. Welcome to the world of chickens.

### *10 FASCINATING FOWL FACTS*

1. Chickens are descended from dinosaurs.
2. Chickens outnumber humans by almost three to one. Around 19 billion are reared worldwide every year.
3. Chickens are the most populous bird species alive.
4. In 2010, there were more than 1,400 breeds of chicken but a total of forty three breeds were considered extinct.
5. Hens lay eggs even without a male; some breeds can lay up to 260 eggs per year, with some individuals able to lay over 300.
6. Hens prefer to mate with dominant males; they can eject the sperm of more subordinate males after copulation.
7. Chicks “cheep” to each other while still within their eggs, which can result in them hatching at the same time.
8. Chickens can run as fast as nine miles per hour.
9. Chickens have a good sense of smell—chicks can even react to odors they were exposed to before hatching.
10. Chickens naturally live to between five and ten years of age, and some can reach 15–16 years of age. In commercial settings with access to nutritional food, broiler chickens reach slaughter weight at just five to six weeks of age.

## KEY CHICKEN TERMS

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- Bantam** A small or miniature breed of chicken. Many large breeds of domestic chickens have miniature counterparts that are also termed bantam varieties.
- Broiler** Chicken breeds selected for fast growth, large appetites, higher muscle mass, and a greater efficiency for converting feed into weight gain.
- Capon** A castrated male chicken.
- Chick** A baby chicken.
- Cock** British term for a mature male chicken—known as a rooster in the United States and Canada.
- Cockerel** Often used to describe an immature male chicken, a male less than one year of age, or a male of any age.
- Hen** A female chicken that lays eggs (egg laying can begin at about twenty weeks of age).
- Layer** Chicken breeds selected for frequent egg laying, not for their meat, with some breeds able to lay more than 250 eggs per year.
- Pullet** A female chicken not yet mature enough to lay eggs, or commonly less than a year old.
- Rooster** A mature male chicken—known as a cock in the UK.

