

# DOMESTIC CHICKEN

**GALLIFORMES, Family: Phasiantidae, Genus: *Gallus*, Species: *gallus***

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## DESCRIPTION:

Chickens differ from other members of the pheasant family in having a comb and wattle about the head and in having a tail more arched and curved. In common with many species of this family, the cock or rooster usually has spurs on the back of the tarsus, above the hind toe: the feet, tarsus and nostrils are unfeathered, in general. Great variety exists in the color and size of barnyard fowl: the egg-laying champion White leghorn is slim and trim; the heavier Rhode Island Reds and Barred Plymouth Rocks are good layers and good meat birds. The feather-shanked Cochin and/or Shangai breeds were of such size as to cause a sensation in England in the 1830's; one author of texts on chickens (S. H. Lewer) reported them to be "as big as ostriches!"

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## RANGE AND HABITAT:

Ancestors of the modern barnyard fowl were probably one (or more) of 4 jungle fowls that ranged from India and Ceylon eastward to Malaysia, Indonesia, Viet Nam, etc. Anthropologists believe the chicken was first domesticated by Bronze Age people about 4000 B.C. there is evidence that this sub-family of pheasants were kept by ancient Sumerians in Asia Minor at least 4000 years ago; recent studies support the idea that Central and South American tribes had domesticated the chicken before the coming of the Europeans to the New World. It has been suggested sailors from Polynesia may have brought the fowl across the Pacific. Whatever the facts, one remains -- that the chicken is truly global, and can be raised in pens, coops, henhouses etc. and in any climate where humans endure, provided the habitat is clean, draft-free roost off the floor and sufficient water, food and exercise.

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## DIET:

Free-ranging fowl that are efficient omnivorous feeders, consuming a great variety of food: green leaves, grass, corn, grains, buds, seeds, vegetables, flowers, egg and oyster shells, bugs, worms, grubs, termites and garbage. They also ingest small stones and gravel which in the gizzard aid in the digestive process.

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## HABITS AND ADAPTATIONS:

Chickens are essentially terrestrial although a few breeds such as Bantams, fly well enough to get into trees. They should have access to the ground, as the dust bath is their favorite diversion. This activity helps to ward off verminous infections for which confined fowl must be periodically checked. Relation of space to the number of birds is very important; if they are crowded into too small a space, as on huge poultry farms, they become restless, bored and psychotic. More than one observer has reported that chickens are quick learners, and not the stupid creatures they have sometimes been pictured.

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## REPRODUCTION

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Chickens are gregarious, but it is generally agreed that one cock per flock of hens is desirable, since multiple males will result in constant battles for dominance. The keeping of chickens for cock-fighting is believed more responsible for the birds' early spread and domestication than for its food-producing potentialities, either for meat or eggs. When a hen decides to "set", she is said to be "broody"; she fluffs up her feathers until her size appears double, and elevates and expands her tail feathers to form an inverted V. The recommended clutch of eggs is about a dozen; the incubation period is twenty-one days. The setting hen turns the eggs several times daily with her beak and is very protective of both eggs and hatched chicks; during incubation she takes a 10 to 20 minute "break" off her nest each day. For the first 2 days after "birth", the chicks do not eat or drink; they appear to have fine vision- and can locate and fix aim exactly on minute objects (feed). The mother and brood keep in constant contact through her clucking and their peeping. At six months the pullets (young hens) start laying, but should not be allowed to set until around two years. Laying hens produce from 120 to 160 eggs per year for a span up to three years, under normal free-ranging conditions, that is, and not on the huge commercial poultry ranch, which boosted turning out 250 eggs yearly per hen.

In many cultures the word for the male chicken has been the same as the word for the male sexual member, the penis: the Anglo-Saxon word cock, is very similar to Sanskrit kukkuta; the Latin, cucurio; Old Slavic, kokotu; Dutch, kuiken; Kaffir (Africa), kuku; etc. ancient writers considered the cock a symbol of masculine virility and tell of its many uses -- as sacrifice to the gods, gifts of lovers, household pets, models in sculpture and architecture, to represent vigilance, resurrection, sunrise. Romans attributed magical powers to the cock: it was said that his crowing could splinter wood, that his comb was an aphrodisiac, that he could forecast the weather and the outcome of military campaigns. The Christian religion also had many miracles and events associated with cocks: the 16<sup>th</sup> century writer, Ulisse Aldrovandi, set down many useful and some fanciful items about the cock, particularly admiring the bird's bravery and comparing him to a stalwart soldier, up at dawn, ready to fight in open battle, attacking without cowardly ambush, raising his standard (flag/tail) on high, and signaling victory with a triumphant cry/crow.

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## MISCELLANEOUS:

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Over 4000 years ago, the Egyptians designed and used incubators capable of hatching up to 10,000 chicks at one time, a feat not equaled until the Golden Age of poultry in the mid-twentieth century. Manipulation of light, space, feed and reproduction in the modern poultry factory have resulted in eggs and meat far in flavor from the farm product, through more reasonable in price than most foods today (and yesterday). In addition, the unnatural confinement of commercial chickens is a plain example of the destruction of nature by technology, and will doubtless at some time be the target of humanitarians. The Chicken Book is a treasure chest of chicken lore, filled with anecdote and entertaining legends, as well as sobering facts. By now, poultry breeders have developed hundreds of different breeds --- for their flesh, their eggs, for cock-fighting or just show. The world's longest (overall length) bird now or ever must be the Japanese Onagadori cock -- with its tail feathers reaching at least 18 feet (5.5 meters) and added to the body length, it is more than 20 feet (6 meters) and must be raised on an elevated perch. It is strictly for show, of course.

Several domestic varieties are allowed to run "free in the SF Zoo" and may be seen almost anywhere on the grounds. The Children's Zoo also has an assortment of breeds which may perch at night in the small grove of trees behind the Squirrel Monkey cage. The chick hatcher near the Prairie Dogs is always interesting to the children who tour this area, but it is unnecessary to mention that those chicks serve as food for most of our birds of prey and small Carnivora.

### Sources:

The Chicken Book

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