

Caring for Ex-battery hens

This guidance, based on information from the Battery Hen Welfare Trust, is designed to help new owners of spent battery hens understand their needs and how to care for them. We don't claim to be experts – there is much yet for us to learn – but here is some simple advice which we hope will be useful.

Accommodation

When choosing accommodation, the number of hens and space available are the key issues. When selecting a house we advise you buy one to accommodate more hens than you intend to keep. For example, if you want six hens we advise you purchase a house to accommodate at least eight. This will ensure they have plenty of space not only to roost and nest but also to shelter from the weather during the day. The hen house needs to be sturdy and secure to protect the hens from fox and badger.

There are houses which are static with attached runs and others which are movable. You will need to assess the best option for your circumstances taking into account that hens like to peck and scratch grass. The bigger the run you can give them the better, not only for their own enjoyment but also to keep the ground they are ranging in good condition. Hens like to create dust bath areas which will become mud baths in the wet weather. If you decide to select a house you can move regularly and free range the hens, you should ensure they are well provided for before allowing them complete freedom. Many people choose to adapt a standard garden shed with perches and nest boxes. As a guide a 6' x 4' shed will comfortably accommodate ten to twelve hens.

Bedding

A number of products are commonly used on the house floor: chopped straw can be used for greater numbers of hens and shavings for fewer numbers. If you are using shavings it is important to buy 'first grade' shavings with the dust extracted. It is available from most county stores and comes in bales.

Nest boxes need soft material in order to make a cosy place in which to lay an egg and shavings with straw on top do the job well although they can sometimes be a favourite hiding place of the red mite (more on bugs later).

Daily Routine

Hens like to be up early so as soon as you can, let the girls out.

They will need fresh food and water and will want clean nest boxes to lay eggs in. Some houses come with nest box lids that can be closed at night and this is very useful to stop them sleeping and fouling the nest, something battery hens are fond of doing. It is advisable to keep the ground clear of spilt grain and other food matter as spills will encourage the local rodent population to move in! If you have the space it may be wise to feed inside the hen house.

The hens will go about their business during daylight hours and will rely on you to close down their pop holes at night for security.

Life Expectancy

It is important to be aware there is no guarantee how long a spent battery hen will live. Some may only live for as short a time as one week, others eight years or more. On average most live for two to three years. We believe that if they are lucky enough to enjoy scratching around for a week or so with the sun on their backs, then they are luckier than most battery hens.

Cockerels

It is best for the girls if they are kept separate from a cockerel for at least four weeks. If they've never seen a cockerel it can be a pretty scary experience when they do and if he's big and keen, he may do damage by jumping on a hen with weak legs or a bald back. If you can, give the hens a couple of weeks to build their confidence and strength.

General Fitness

Your girls will have done nothing other than stand in a tiny cage for their entire lives. Consequently they will be unfit to begin with and usually unable to jump up to a roost or nest box.

This problem can be overcome by placing a ramp up to the roost/nest box or giving them access to a nest box on the floor. Even a cardboard box on its side with shavings and a bit of hay will suffice until they are fit enough to use the proper facilities. It doesn't take them very long to build up their strength and within a couple of weeks most are capable of jumping to a standard roost height.

Health

We never knowingly allow a hen to go to a new home with health problems although occasionally one does slip through the net because of the large numbers we are dealing with.

When the hens first go into cages in the battery unit they will have had many vaccinations to protect the farmer against large losses which are usually administered through spray misting the chicks or in drinking water. The most common diseases vaccinated against are Marek's disease, infectious bronchitis, salmonella, Newcastle disease, Gumboro disease and epidemic tremor. One of the more common problems with spent battery hens is bruising, often to legs, sometimes to wings. This usually occurs when they are removed from the cages. It can be so bad the hen finds standing painful and if you gently look you will see dark bruising under her skin. Arnica cream rubbed in works wonders. As long as you see that she gets food and water a bruised hen will recover within seven to fourteen days with no lasting ill effects. Do not separate her from the other hens as when you return her to the group she will be seen as an outsider and bullied.

Occasionally, a hen will have a broken bone and in this instance it is best to ask your vet to set the bone. Wings and legs can be mended successfully.

Weather Conditions/Temperatures

The hens have been used to warm conditions within the battery unit. Their combs act as heat dissipaters and this is why so many combs are large and floppy. They will redden as they are exposed to the weather and usually shrink as the hens lose less heat.

If the sun is very strong the hens can suffer sunburn, especially the 'oven-readies'. Equally if it's cold, wet and windy they need to be encouraged into their new homes because they tend to stand still and get wet which can lead to sniffles and worse.

Homing the Girls

When you first take your girls home it's usually best to keep them in the house for a day or so to acclimatise them. Even the pleasure of discovering a shed is far more stimulation than they are used to so they should be quite happy. If you have a small enclosure restricting their range, it would be good to let them out straight away.

When you let them out for the first time do so about an hour before dusk. That will encourage them to stay near to the house and return as darkness falls.

Foxes and other predators

Foxes and badgers can devastate an entire flock within minutes and leave destruction in their wake. It is essential that you lock up your hens securely every single night. If you forget once, you run the risk of attack.

Remember that foxes may attack during daylight hours too. If you live where you know foxes are prevalent, consider keeping the hens securely fenced or penned when you are not around.

Egg production/nesting

Although there is no guarantee how many eggs spent battery hens will lay, generally you will get about 40-50% production rate, i.e. ten hens will lay four or five eggs daily. Battery hens have no concept of a nest box facility. Eggs will be dropped wherever they happen to be walking at the time of lay. Rubber or china egg balls are a wonderful way of teaching the hens about the pleasure of laying in a cosy nest. The hens can be quite clumsy to begin with and the rubber eggs are ideal because they're realistic and indestructible.

Nails & Beaks

Toenails are often very long although a new regulation in force stipulates that cages should have a claw shortening device. They will wear down quickly as the hen free ranges but occasionally they are so long they will distort how the hen places her foot on the ground. We clip as many as we can but if we haven't had time to clip the nails and they are too long, dog nail clippers will do the job. Always take care not to cut the quick.

The birds have nearly always been debeaked; it is the top beak which is cut, making the bottom beak look like a shovel. Don't be tempted to trim the bottom beak. In most instances it will wear down to its natural size and shape whilst the hen free ranges. The hen will cope with what she has. After all, she's lived for a year with the beak.

Food & Water

Battery hens have been fed dry layers mash throughout their incarceration in cages and they know nothing else. We strongly recommend that for at least one month you continue to feed layers mash, although it is fine to offer an alternative from the start. Layers pellets are the same as the mash product but the hens don't recognise the pellets as readily. Consequently we recommend you feed mash at least to begin with.

It may also be worth noting that dry layers mash will take on the mantle of 'comfort food' to a hen which may be off colour. In more than one instance, feeding dry layers mash has turned around a lacklustre hen.

Establishing the Pecking Order

You'll probably find the girls will be in awe of everything around them for the first few days and they will be very polite to one another. However, once they get the hang of the daily routine, usually within two or three days, they will start to squabble. You have to let them get on with it as they are sorting out the pecking order i.e. who's going to be head of the household. Ensure all the hens are eating and drinking and that no blood is drawn. If blood is drawn, you'll need to separate the hen as the others will only continue to bully her.

You'll most likely find it is the smallest, most feather-bare hen causing the most disruption and having a go at the others. The hen is only behaving like that because she's probably had to fight for every mouthful of food and water within the battery cage and every time she's managed to get food, a bird behind her has been pecking at her, hence her threadbare appearance. It will sort itself out in a couple of weeks and the most disruptive hen will realise there are far more interesting things to do than worry about her position within her new family.

Bugs

The most common problem you can import when you take on battery hens is red mite. This is a tiny mite that feeds on the hens' blood at night and during the day lives in the shed under perches, in the nesting area or in cracks and crevices in the house. Red mite can be controlled with many products on the market and, like fleas, will flare up in warmer weather and die down during the winter months. Be aware though that left untreated it can prove fatal.

Enjoy your hens and thank you for giving them a second chance.