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THE IT BIRD

The return of the back-yard chicken.

by Susan Orlean September 28, 2009



If I had never seen Janet Bonney reënact the mouth-to-beak resuscitation of her hen Number Seven, who had been frozen solid in a nor'easter, then was thawed and nursed back to life—being hand-fed and massaged as she watched doctor shows on TV—I might never have become a chicken person. But a few years ago I happened to watch a documentary called “The Natural History of the Chicken,” which opens with the story of Bonney and Number Seven, and for the first time the thought of owning chickens entered my mind. I had watched the film with no preëxisting chicken condition. But seeing Number Seven’s resurrection, followed by beauty shots of exotic hens, and segments about small back-yard flocks, I suddenly found myself wanting chickens, and wanting them with an urgency that exceeded even my mad adolescent desire to have a pony. At first, I thought this chicken fixation was a phase that I alone was going through, but it turns out that right now, across the country and beyond, there is a surging passion for raising the birds. Chickens seem to be a perfect convergence of the economic, environmental, gastronomic, and emotional matters of the moment, plus, in the past few years, they have undergone an image rehabilitation so astonishing that it should be studied by marketing consultants. Now that I actually have chickens—seven, at last count, but that number, because of predators, is disturbingly variable—I am the object of more pure envy than I have ever experienced in my life.

On a Venn diagram plotting the interest in chicken ownership and circumstance related to age, gender, acreage, appetite, and aesthetic tolerance, I would land in that pitch-dark center where all the sets overlap. Even now, two years into my chicken stewardship, this is a big surprise to me. I am an animal fancier, but fur-bearing has always been my type: I had never wanted a bird. When I left Manhattan a few years ago and moved a hundred miles north to a house with land and animal-friendly zoning, the first creature I planned on getting was a horse, later downgraded to a donkey. I did fleetingly consider a duck, because I had seen some at my neighbor’s house and thought they were darling. But we didn’t have a pond, and the idea of getting ducks and then having their water source be a plastic kiddie pool from Toys “R” Us seemed to undermine the rusticity of the experience.

By the time I saw “The Natural History of the Chicken,” however, something had been stirring in the poultry world for a while. In 1982, Martha Stewart published her first book, “Entertaining,” which featured her

flock of rare-breed chickens and their pretty pastel-colored eggs. The photographs of Stewart with the flock were a revelation. For the previous forty years or so, chicken farming had been viewed as a lowly profession, stuck in the netherworld between the high-stakes cattle business and the matter-of-fact farming of crops, and factory-raised chickens seemed to be the worst of both—they were almost more plant than animal, but animal-messy and smelly and sentient. No glamour attached itself to chickens. Stewart's book went on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. Its readers were probably more interested in how to make her Crab Apple Rosemary Jelly or, for that matter, her Curried Walnut Chicken than in raising a flock of their own Araucanas and Buff Cochins, but they couldn't have helped noting Stewart's endorsement of chicken-keeping. Within the next few years, Stewart launched her magazine, and often featured her chickens in Ford-model-style head shots that made them look ennobled; she also introduced her first paint collection, which was based on egg colors from her flock. She made chickens seem less like livestock and more like useful and companionable creatures. "All of my chickens had names, all of them," she said recently. "I knew all of them. I worried about them. I was really unhappy when anything happened to them. For instance, I was unhappy when my Egyptian Fayoumi hen froze to death." She sighed and then added, "It was awful. I'll never get another Egyptian Fayoumi again."

Not long ago, I was in the waiting room of my veterinarian's office with one of my chickens, who was ailing. A red-faced man with a lame poodle was sitting next to me. I had my chicken in a cat carrier, and when the man leaned over to peek at her I could tell by the look on his face that he had expected to see a mewling kitten. He plopped back in his chair and said to me, "Chickens are the new hot pet, I guess." Well, yes and no. Until the nineteen-fifties, it was common to keep a few chickens around. They were cheap and easy to raise; unlike cows or sheep, they were hardy and tolerant of most weather, could subsist on table scraps and bugs, took up little space, required the simplest of housing, and fertilized the garden while they scratched through it. Gathering eggs was so easy that children were often assigned to do it; by contrast, getting milk or meat or wool was a major production. A chicken was a good investment. A hundred years ago, a chick cost about fifteen cents and a laying hen a few dollars. A hen in her prime, which lasts two or three years, could produce an egg every day or two in the laying season, and once she stopped laying she could be cooked. Buying eggs year-round at a supermarket is a relatively recent development. Commercial incubators, allowing for large-scale chicken enterprise, weren't invented until the late eighteen-hundreds, and they weren't used widely for decades. Even then, egg production was slow. Until the nineteen-thirties, when the Department of Agriculture launched its "poultry-improvement plan" to breed healthier, more productive hens—and the subsequent development of factory farms—eggs were still available only seasonally, like shad roe, and many people kept their own chickens.

Part of what is unusual about chickens is that they have always been women's livestock: women and chickens just seem to have a natural harmony. The covers of early chicken magazines, such as *Everybody's Poultry Magazine*, *Poultry Success*, and *Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife*, featured women and children on sun-kissed farms with hens and chicks at their feet. A book published in 1919, "A Little Journey Among Anconas," which extolls the Ancona breed, features a photograph of a lovely young woman in a crisp summer dress, gazing adoringly at a black chicken perched on her right hand. Small and manageable, chickens were just an extension of a kitchen garden, and women often sold extra eggs to make some money of their own. In an 1893 book called "What Can a Woman Do," a guide for women looking for income, the suggested professions include lady journalist, dentist, poet, and hen-keeper. Beekeeping and gardening are the only other

agricultural jobs on the list. The author, Martha Louise Rayne, announces that there is “MONEY IN EGGS,” and she recounts the story of two “tempest-tossed and homeless women” who set up a poultry farm together and enjoy great success—that is, until one of them decides to marry a male biped, forsaking her hens and her poultry partner. Nevertheless, Rayne recommends that even married women keep chickens, because it can be done without interfering with domestic duties.

The usual barnyard chicken in the early nineteenth century had a red comb, glossy feathers, and dinosaurlike legs—sleek and nice-looking but unremarkable. Then, in the eighteen-forties, a breed of Chinese chicken was introduced to North America and Great Britain. The fattest and fluffiest of these birds were interbred to create a fancy type, a Cochin, that had the approximate shape and texture of a powder puff. The world was agog. A frenzy of poultry breeding and showing and speculative trading began, a crazed bubble nearly on the scale of Dutch tulip mania or Victorian orchidelirium. Prices reached absurd levels—in one instance, a pair of Cochins were valued at seven hundred dollars, about ten thousand per cent more than chickens usually cost. Everyone, from Queen Victoria to members of Congress and aspiring gentry, wanted an extraordinary chicken, especially once the birds were alleged to have remarkable qualities, including exceptional intelligence, and eggs weighing a pound apiece. Interestingly, “hen fever,” as it was called, seemed to affect men more than women. *The Century Magazine* reported on it in 1898, explaining that a “hen-man” lost all interest in life except for his chickens: he “may have been an ardent admirer of Shakespeare . . . but now he reads to himself ‘Farm Poultry’ or ‘The Care of Hens.’ ”

Eventually, crooks and swindlers and even P. T. Barnum infiltrated the trade. (In some cases, dealers were gluing feathers onto ordinary birds to make them look like Cochins.) Soon it became clear that the imagined profits in rare-chicken trading were entirely imaginary; chicken trendsetters like Prince Albert began to tire of the hobby; and then the chickens, collected in too large numbers into too small houses, began to die. Hen fever cooled; men resumed their reading of Shakespeare, and chickens returned to their previous status as sturdy, steady farmworkers.

They were such a fixture in most households that, even as Americans drifted from the country to the cities, they took their chickens with them. Very few cities specifically outlawed chickens until many decades later. You couldn’t bring the family cow along when you moved to town, but anyone with a patch of grass could have a chicken or two. But inexpensive supermarket eggs became readily available in the fifties, at approximately the same time as the enchantment with a hygienic, suburbanized life took hold. Can you picture the ambitious young couples of Westchester in the fifties wanting chickens pecking around the flagstone patio and the swing set? What felt modern was to leave the farm behind. In fact, many philosophers, such as John Berger, argue that modernity can be traced, in part, to the moment when we no longer relied on animals for utility, and they were withdrawn from daily life except as ornaments. Then eggs themselves became suspect: in 1964, Konrad Bloch and Feodor Lynen were awarded a Nobel Prize for their research on cholesterol, which conjured images of hardened arteries and vascular lesions, and the assault on eggs, with their cholesterol-rich yolks, began. In an effort to counteract all these things, the American Egg Board launched its “Incredible Edible Egg” campaign in 1976, but the cumulative effect of the bad news meant that casual chicken-keeping seemed doomed.

When I first determined that I had to have chickens, I had trouble figuring out how to go about it. Living in the country, I saw plenty of chickens on working farms, so I occasionally asked the owners if they would be willing to sell me a couple of hens, but no one was interested in parting with any; a mature hen who is a good

egg layer is too useful to give up. In the spring, my local feed store set up a tower of little cages filled with tiny peeping chicks, still cottony and clumsy, but you were required to buy at least a six-pack of them, and the prospect of heat lamps and high chick mortality rates made me uneasy. More worrisome was the fact that unless you are a professional chicken-sexer (a critical job in the poultry industry) it is nearly impossible to tell the sex of a baby chick, so your six-pack might turn out to be six roosters. Fine if you like deluxe feathers, but not much use if you hope for eggs.

My chicken thing was not, initially, an egg thing. Having never had a really fresh egg, I didn't find much fault with what I got at ShopRite, and for years I hardly ate any eggs, keeping my cholesterol in mind. But, by the time I started thinking about chickens, eggs had been exonerated. A widely reviewed 2001 study by researchers at Kansas State University established that, because the human body doesn't absorb a substantial amount of the cholesterol in egg yolks, eating an egg or two a day is fine. (Egg whites are completely innocent.) Popular high-protein diets such as the Atkins promoted the omelette as an almost perfect meal. By 2007, the American Egg Board felt confident enough to relaunch the Incredible Edible Egg campaign, supported by a number of health professionals called Egg Ambassadors. In addition, the concept of the hundred-mile diet—that is, eating food that is not only organic but is grown or raised within a hundred miles of your home—had gained traction; the term “locavore” was popularized the same year. What could be more local than your back yard? It was a fine thing to grow your own lettuce and tomatoes and make salad, but raising chickens meant that you could make a main dish with ingredients kept right outside your door. For the squeamish, it had the added appeal of being a main dish that didn't involve killing anything. If you were trying to design a product that satisfied the social preoccupations of the moment, you couldn't have done better than to come up with a hen.

I didn't yet realize that there was a chicken movement under way. I had yet to stumble on the dozens of online chicken groups and Web sites—such as Chickens 101, Housechicken, Cotton-Pickin Chickens, Yardpoultry, and My Pet Chicken—and I was not yet one of the forty thousand members of the BackyardChickens.com forums, and I was not one of the fifteen thousand people who log on each month to watch the writer Terry Golson's “hencam,” which Webcasts live from her back-yard coop near Boston, and I had not yet bought Christine Heinrichs's 2007 book, “How to Raise Chickens,” a plainspoken guide for people who might not ever have seen a live chicken, which keeps selling more and more copies.

But I did notice that every time I mentioned to my friends that I wanted chickens they all exclaimed that they wanted them, too. It was a species-specific response: when I added that my husband wanted Scottish Highland cattle, those same people were taken aback and inevitably said, “That's weird. How come?” Chicken-keeping seemed slightly less as if we'd tipped over the edge of sanity and were throwing ourselves recklessly, “Green Acres” style, into livestock. Rather, chickens seemed to go hand-in-glove with the post-feminist reclamation of other farmwife domestic arts—knitting, canning, quilting. It was a do-it-yourself hobby at a moment when doing things yourself was newly appreciated as a declaration of self-sufficiency, a celebration of handwork, and a push-back from a numbing and disconnected big-box life.

I started shopping for a chicken coop, but everything I found had a design that seemed half doghouse, half toolshed, and was big enough to hold twenty hens. I had grown up in the suburbs and had spent twenty years in Manhattan. I was no sissy, but I knew my limits: I pictured myself with three or four full-grown hens, who lived in some sort of groovy little chicken house that didn't recall a faux Swiss chalet in a failed housing development.

One night, on the Internet, I was searching unlikely terms such as “cool-looking chicken coops” and “modern design chicken house,” and came across the Eglu. A squat plastic dome that came in bright colors, the Eglu was compact and meant for just four hens. Better still, you could order it *with* hens—not six fuzzballs of indeterminate gender, and not the minimum order of twenty-five typical of most hatcheries, but even just two, on the brink of maturity (what chicken people call “point-of-lay”), delivered to a post office near you.

Recently, I spoke to Johannes Paul, one of the founders of Omlet, the British company that makes the Eglu. Paul was not initially a chicken person. He and the other three Omlet founders were industrial-design students at the Royal College of Art, in London, facing the paralyzing prospect of their thesis project in 2004. They were supposed to reconsider an ordinary object, and one of their mothers, who kept chickens, suggested designing a better chicken house. Commercially available coops, like homemade ones, were built of wood, which is hard to clean, hard to keep dry, and hard to seal well for insulation. “Plastic really is fantastic,” Paul said. “Using the kind of rotational molding that we do means it has inherent insulation, and it’s seamless, and it can be made in saturated colors.” For the first time, a chicken house could look and feel modern. In fact, when the Eglu was first displayed a lot of people thought it was a new product from Apple.

Their professors loved it, and their friends and families were so enthusiastic that the students decided to try it out in the real world. They incorporated, priced the house at the equivalent of about six hundred dollars, and launched it, without any advertising, on their Web site. Omlet sold a thousand Eglus in the first year, and sales have tripled every year since. Most people ordered the Eglu complete with the optional chickens—and, according to Paul, for most customers it was the first time they had ever had chickens. Omlet was reluctant to sell the Eglu in the United States, because the cost of shipping was so high, and because the company felt that Americans were at least a decade behind Europeans in having an interest in organic, local food—that we were not yet a nation of chicken-keepers. But there were so many inquiries that, in 2006, Omlet decided to introduce it here.

Since then, TreeHugger.com, which monitors ecological trends, has gone from describing urban chicken-raising as a “weird eco-habit” to declaring it a “movement across North America.” There have been successful challenges to anti-chicken-keeping laws in Fort Collins, Cleveland, Missoula, Ann Arbor, Madison, and South Portland, Maine, and guides published for anyone wanting to challenge anti-chicken ordinances in his or her town. There is a petition currently circulating urging the Obamas to add a chicken flock to the White House garden. (“Sasha and Malia will love them. Tad Lincoln kept a turkey he named Jack in the White House. Bring back this happy practice!”) *Backyard Poultry*, a magazine that began publishing four years ago, is now distributing a hundred thousand copies. The publisher, Dave Belanger, says that stores are eager to carry it, while in the past, “I don’t think you could have gotten a chicken magazine on a newsstand.” Many pet stores are now carrying chicken feed alongside the racks of Fancy Feast and rawhide rolls. I recently came across the ultimate evidence of contemporary chicken ownership: instructions, on the blog *Ikeahacker*, for building a chicken coop out of furniture from Ikea.

The optional chickens available for the Eglu are supplied in the United States by McMurray Hatchery, an Iowa company that is the largest rare-breed poultry hatchery in the world (the catalogue offers a hundred and ten breeds). The company was founded in 1917 by Murray McMurray, an Iowa banker who, as a hobby, sold chickens out of the back of the bank. During the Depression, the bank failed, but the chicken business took off—a correlation that sounds a lot like the present day—and thus Banker McMurray became Hen-man McMurray. This year, McMurray Hatchery, which caters to people with back-yard flocks, sold 1.7 million

chickens, ranging from day-old chicks, which cost two dollars each, to point-of-lay hens, which cost \$12.95. For the past two years, operating at capacity, the hatchery has been sold out of all of its birds even before it was ready to ship. The only other year in recent memory in which it sold out was 1999. Bud Wood, the company president, attributes that to fear about the millennium. “When times are tough,” he said, “people want chickens.”

I ordered a chartreuse Eglu with four red hens. The Eglu came via U.P.S.; a few days later, the hens were delivered to the post office. “You have a package here,” the postal clerk said when she called, “and it’s clucking.” I rushed into town, picked up the package—heavier than I had expected, smaller than I had pictured, as noisy as I had been warned. At home, I opened the box and decanted the hens into the attachable wire pen that comes with the Eglu. They were young but full-sized Rhode Island Red hybrids called Gingernut Rangers, with bright brown eyes and rich red feathers speckled with white. Their combs were small and pink and their knobby legs were bright yellow. Within six weeks or so, their combs would redden and their legs would pale—signs that they were about to start laying.

The knock on chickens has always been that they’re stupid. Even some chicken fanciers hold this opinion. I had recently read an online comment from someone who announced cheerily that her chickens “are extremely entertaining due to the fact that they are dumb as stumps!” But my hens didn’t seem stupid. They explored the pen with that stop-action motion that makes chickens look like cartoon characters, but with a brisk alertness and sharp curiosity. Right away, I figured out that “pecking order” isn’t just a figure of speech: they adhered to a strict social system, with each hen taking her turn at the feeder, and corrective nips doled out to any chicken that stepped out of line.

When a few weeks had passed, and the birds were settled in, I let them out of their pen during the day to range around. If I was outside, they stayed near me, chuckling and purring as they pecked at bugs and grass. Because we have acres of meadow where they could have roamed free, they of course exhibited the contrarian impulse of all pets and decided that their favorite place to spend the afternoon was right at my front door, or in the planter box in the courtyard. But I was smitten. I found watching them soothing, and, to my surprise, as someone who has never liked housework, I enjoyed all my chicken-related labors—feeding and watering them and hosing out their Eglu. I especially loved going to the feed store and buying bales of hay for their nests and fifty-pound sacks of feed. It made me feel that I had legitimized myself as a local. When one of my hens laid my first homegrown egg, I was as proud as if I had been attending my daughter’s bat mitzvah.

There have been difficult moments, too. A few months after my hens arrived, my neighbor’s two indolent old mutts roused themselves, clawed open the Eglu, and killed two of the birds. I was sick about it, but I restocked with four young chickens that I found through an online chicken group. Then I lost two of those. They were picked off in broad daylight, probably by a hawk or an owl or a coyote or a raccoon or a fox—everyone in the woods loves chicken, and chickens, which don’t fly well, run fast, or fight hard, are sitting ducks. So I built a big fenced-in yard with netting over the top, and put the Eglu in it, and stopped letting the hens wander around loose. I had never thought of them as prey, but in the bucolic scenes I had imagined of chickens strolling across my lawn all the lip-smacking predators had been cropped out of the picture.

At one point, when I was down to two chickens, I noticed that one wasn’t standing up properly. She also stopped laying eggs and lost a lot of weight. If I were a real farmer, I would have culled her—killed her—and been done with it. But I’m not a real farmer, so I began hauling her back and forth to the vet. He couldn’t diagnose the problem, but he gave her an injection of steroids and a prescription for antibiotics. She didn’t get

any better: she couldn't even reach her food unless I held her up to the feeder. I called an avian expert I tracked down in Boston, who wasn't sure what to make of it, either. My research led me to something called Marek's disease, a contagious kind of chicken cancer that attacks the bird's nervous system and can kill a whole flock if it spreads. The sick bird had been my friendliest, calmest hen, the one that most enjoyed being held and stroked and that laid wallop-ing big brown eggs. I had named her Beauty, but I noticed that the label on her antibiotics said "Patient: Chicken Orlean," which even in my funk I found hilarious.

After a month of hand-feeding her, dripping the antibiotics down her beak, and getting no diagnosis beyond my hunch that it might be Marek's, I finally realized that Chicken Orlean was miserable and there was nothing more I could do. I eat chicken all the time, so I am not morally opposed to killing a chicken, but I couldn't kill my own pet, so I took her back to the vet. After he injected her with the fatal dose of pentobarbital, I went out into the waiting room and sobbed. The room was empty except for a husky woman holding a snuffling tan pug. She came over and put an arm around me and said, "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Was it your dog?"

"No," I said, my face in my hands, "it was my chicken."

Now I have seven chickens. I would say that I have seven hens, except that one—sweet, demure, shy Laura—recently proved my point about the challenges of chicken sexing, as she sprouted big red wattles and started crowing at dawn. So the new tally is that I have six hens and an unanticipated rooster. Meanwhile, the chicken movement seems to be expanding exponentially. I do detect a little overripening on the edges—I've noticed some late-stage phenomena such as chicken diapers, for people who want their chickens as house pets, and there will undoubtedly be chicken coops that go beyond the crisp functionality of the Eglu, with flourishes that push into the decadent.

Even people central to the chicken world are predicting what might supplant chickens, if and when chickens run their course. Dave Belanger, of *Backyard Poultry*, says goats; McMurray's Bud Wood thinks ducks. But chickens seem to me steadier than that. They have already survived hen bubbles and cholesterol scares and the enormous social change that chased them out of the back yard; they will survive diapers and jewelled coops and an uptick in ducks. The chicken, that thing with feathers, always sunny and useful, will endure. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: RALPH STEADMAN