

Re-homing a battery hen

Smallholder Elizabeth Morton from Norfolk writes about her experience of re-homing ex-battery hens

I have always liked the idea of having my own chickens, but, at the same time, I have always rescued my pets, so when it came to thinking about what kind of chickens to get, I thought I'd check out rescue hens first.

My first step was to get in touch with the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) via their website. The BHWT is a national charity that re-homes commercial laying hens, educates the public about how they can make a difference to hen welfare, and encourages support for the British egg industry. I had a good chat with the re-homing coordinator to find out everything I could about their work and what re-homing a battery hen entailed. At the same time, I contacted my local council to check that I could keep birds in my garden.

Arrival

As a first-timer, I was very excited about getting my chickens, but, luckily, my research ensured I was prepared for the poor state they were in. Ex-battery hens definitely need a little TLC when they first come home, but it is very rewarding to see them improve. As time passes, they get stronger, more confident and grow more feathers through, until you end up with plump, happy hens laying tasty eggs. As a beginner, I started with just the essentials for my hens, which was a coop, feeding and drinking containers, food, grit, bedding material and a general 'how to' pack. The type of coop really depends on the size of the area you keep your chickens in and how many you have, but it is important that it is fox proof. For their feed I sought advice from the nutritionists at the Smallholder Range and found the best to be a specifically designed Ex-Bat Crumb. This has all the ingredients that ex-battery hens need to help improve their general condition when being re-homed. My girls also get a handful of super mixed corn as a treat in the evening.

Settling in

On arrival, my chickens settled in very quickly. They easily got used to their new routine and started tapping on the window of their coop at the times they thought I should be letting them out! They settled in very well with the dogs and quickly made the garden their own. Although I was prepared



FIND OUT MORE

■ For more information on re-homing ex-battery hens contact the British Hen Welfare Trust at www.bhwt.org.uk.

■ The Ex-Bats Range from the Smallholder Range is specially formulated for the welfare and condition of ex-battery hens.

For feeding and care advice visit their website: www.smallholderfeed.co.uk



for some teething trouble, my hens didn't have too many health problems, but I had already found out who my local poultry friendly vet was – just in case. It was also reassuring to know that there was a BHWT care line I could ring if I had any general questions or concerns about looking after them. This came in very handy as I had never had any experience of keeping chickens before.

Results

The best bits about keeping your own hens are simple really: it's so tranquil just sitting in the garden watching them potter around. Collecting your own eggs and cooking and eating them is excellent, and you always have gifts for people too. It's lovely to watch them settle in and, when they get used to you, they follow you around wanting to know what you're doing and what treats you have for them. The worst bit is that you won't get any lay-ins during the summer – they want to be up at first light and do not want to go in until dark!

I have found the whole experience of rescuing battery hens incredibly rewarding, and I love to look at them now and see how happy they are. Rescuing cats and dogs is now a common event in society, so why not chickens too? With so many battery hens requiring homes, it's a great way to help out a very good cause ... and get tasty eggs too!

Writer

Elizabeth Morton is nearly 30 and works in manufacturing. She lives in a village just outside of Norwich with her partner Graham, dogs Marley and Mylo, and now a small brood of hens.

Chicks carrying on as normal with a towel wrapped around a hot water bottle



WHEN THE HEAT GOES OFF

Power failure was not something I had factored into the 'obstacles' list for this year's breeding season; as it transpired, it quite clearly should have been, *writes Grant Brereton*.

I have had a great breeding season so far, and almost every egg from my Partridge Wyandotte breeding pen has hatched.

That was until one, fateful, Saturday morning. The alarm clock was off and that meant only one thing – there must have been a power cut in the night. I flew out of bed and checked the time on our wall clock – it was 7am, and I had gone to bed at 2am, so it was purely guesswork as to what time the power went off. The power failure was caused by strong winds and, judging by the temperature of the eggs in the incubator, and the fact the chicks were still alive in the brooders, I guessed that the electric had been off for just two hours.

These are the kind of situations that arise, but about which no-one had warned you. They seem to happen so rarely that it's hardly worth talking about. However, over the last 24 years' of hatching and rearing artificially, I have encountered quite a few power failures, and I feel it's important to be prepared and equipped for such unfortunate occasions.

A few options

The chances are, if you have chicks in a brooder, you will also have eggs in an incubator – especially at this time of year. Likewise, there is also a good chance that you will have friends or family close by who haven't been affected by the power failure, and you will have to make the decision on how long you can wait for the electricity board to fix the problem, before you descend on your friends or family for help.

With hindsight, I foolishly covered the incubator with two towels and prayed the electricity board would fix the problem as soon as possible. However, by 11am I could wait no longer and, although many believe that could have been too late, I still had to try to rescue the eggs. Luckily, my Mum took my incubator and the hatch rate (two weeks later) didn't seem affected, which I hope will allay a few fears, should any readers find themselves in a similar situation.

You may think that once the power has been off for a few hours that there is little use continuing with incubation as the embryos will have died. In my experience, this is rarely so. In most instances, the eggs just take a few hours longer to hatch, obviously depending

on the incubation time they lost. I recall a Barnevelder broody abandoning her eggs for a full eight hours one time, (after she had been sitting for two weeks) before deciding she was serious about motherhood and returned to the nest to successfully hatch all eight eggs a week later.

Embryo strength also plays a big part – the more hybrid vigour, the better the chance of embryo survival.

Chicks need heat

The older a chick, the more chance it has of surviving a few hours of power failure. For instance, I had one batch of chicks that were two weeks old. They seemed largely unaffected by the failure. However, the other batch of chicks, which were a mere seven days old, were huddling together and had obviously got past the point of cheeping loudly in distress.

I managed to keep them alive and seemingly quite content, by boiling some water on a camping stove and placing it in a hot water bottle. I wrapped the water bottle in a towel and placed it in the brooder. I carried out this process periodically every couple of hours and it seemed to do the trick. The electricity finally came on at 8pm, some 15 hours later. I am just glad that we weren't away for the weekend when it happened.

Back up, back up!

I speak to many poultry people and I hear many incubation stories, which, unfortunately, are not all good. People tell me about their disasters with incubation and artificial rearing, to which my answer has always been 'with poultry, if it can go wrong, it will'.

Admittedly, I leave the odd thing to chance, but it proves that you can't be too careful. An instance here is when the bulb on my friend's brooder went out – he woke the next day to find 32 dead chicks, which, as you can imagine, is a fairly distressing sight.

Power failure aside, if you have just one bulb in your brooder, you are leaving it purely to chance that it doesn't blow. I know of a case recently when an infra-red bulb that was just three days old blew and, if it were not for the emergency measures of a quick-thinking loved one, all chicks would have died.

I don't like having normal light bulbs in brooders. However, history serves as a reminder that without such bulbs, I would have lost countless chicks over the years. I prefer to use dull emitter bulbs which only emit heat rather than light. The inclusion of a 40 or 60 watt bulb raised about seven to eight inches from the litter of the brooder can serve as an excellent back up, should the main source of heat (whatever it may be) fail in situations other than power cuts.

These are just a few tips. With many things in life, we usually have to learn the hard way before realising the dangers.