



Emma Sfarman with Queenie

Better than Prozac

Imagine if your dog could drive you to work, or your cat could make you a cup of tea in the morning. Hens aren't quite that intelligent, but they are a pet with some serious benefits, says Francesaca Taffs, for what other pet can offer its owner fresh eggs for breakfast?

These feathered friends certainly aren't the bird brains some would make out and, just to prove a point, their popularity has exploded in recent years to the extent that the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) has now re-homed more than 550,000 of them since it was founded in 2005.

To date, 7,107 of these hens have found themselves a free range retirement in Hinton Parva which is one of more than 30 pop-up re-homing points around the UK.

Interestingly, ex-commercial hens in particular make wonderful pets for first-time chicken owners. They are a relatively inexpensive pet once their initial needs have been catered for, they're incredibly grateful (well you would be if the alternative was slaughter, wouldn't you?), they all develop their own personalities and are very therapeutic to have around. They're often described as cats and dogs with feathers. They also come with the full gambit of vaccinations having been through the rigorous commercial flock regulations.

"Being an animal lover, the thought of rescuing ex-battery hens had always appealed to me and I finally took the plunge five years ago starting with three hens," said Gareth Harries, Wiltshire co-ordinator. "I was initially struck by how quickly they started to regrow their missing feathers and establish a 'pecking order' as well as being fearless around my cats!"

The feathered ladies re-homed by the BHWT are around 18 months old when they come out of their cages and are classed as 'end of lay' hens; however, if fed properly they will generally carry on laying. Most of the hens saved from slaughter by the charity have never seen daylight and never stood on soft grass, nor scratched for bugs and slugs, something purebred chickens take for granted.

You'd be hard pressed to find a greater feeling than bringing home an ex-commercial

'You'd be hard-pressed to find a greater feeling than bringing home an ex-commercial hen and watching her find her way around her new home'

hen and watching her find her way around her new home, knowing that just a few hours ago she had never seen the big outdoors.

This isn't a sentiment which dies down after a few days. Some hens can be a bit threadbare in the feather department and each time you spot a new feather growing back, or your girls do something funny for the first time you'll be reminded of just what you've given them – the chance to free range, and enjoy life.

Even more inspiring is the fact that one good deed leads to another and it's not just about what you've given the girls – it's just as much about what they can do for you. Keeping hens gives people focus and, often, a reason to get up in the morning.

During a recent study conducted by Occupational Therapist Lianne Peters into how ex-commercial hens can enhance people's wellbeing, 94% of people reported a sense of pride in seeing their hens flourish as the most common effect on their wellbeing.

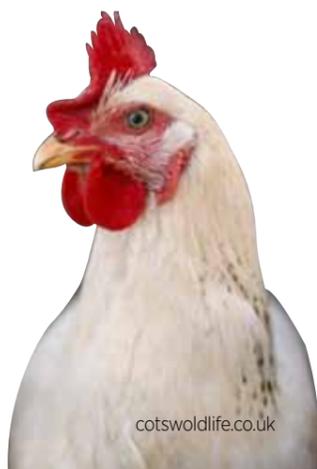
One participant said: "When I become depressed and sad, it helps to focus on the hens and rooster and know they rely on me to feed and care for them on a daily basis. In a way they have replaced the gap left in my life by my husband's passing. Doctor has prescribed anti-depressants, but these girls are

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PAM AYRES' HENS

"I'm not sure I would describe my hens as pets. It's more a case of I look after them and they look after me. Mine are ex-battery hens, available for a suggested donation of a fiver each from the British Hen Welfare Trust, 01884 860084. I have four. I feed them on layers mash and mixed corn from Countrywide, and they have a sturdy, wheeled house in a moveable run. It is unusual if I don't get four eggs a day which is nice, but even nicer is to see them sprout fine feathers and enjoy dust-baths in the sunshine after their earlier caged life."



better than Prozac and no nasty side effects!"

Lianne is hoping to promote the value of hens as therapy through her work, as it has long been acknowledged that pet ownership encourages responsibility and self-esteem.

One BHWT supporter told us about the benefits of having hens as pets: "I suffer from mental health disease, and being responsible for looking after these girls, and having beautiful eggs as a bonus, has turned my world around. This is 'their' time, and they will live a full, free and

happy life, after all they have given us."

If you're not yet convinced of the life enriching properties of hens, to further cement their popularity as pets, a clever hen named Woof was recently voted Pet of the Year in a regional newspaper competition. It might not be an Oscar or a Nobel Prize, but it is just as incredible in the hen world because Woof beat countless cuddly cats and dogs to be crowned 'pet' of the year.

However, the charity is not content with re-homing tens of thousands of hens each year, another incredibly important offshoot of its work is the drive to improve veterinary support when it comes to treating chickens. All too often distressed hen keepers have called the BHWT Advice Line because their vet has suggested putting their hen to sleep, when she has a problem which is entirely treatable.

As the British Veterinary Association's Charity of the Year in 2015/16 the charity took great strides towards promoting hens as pets securing articles in the veterinary press highlighting common hen ailments and how to treat them. It was its work that, in part too, led to the establishment of The Chicken Vet, a service offering vets the opportunity to attend courses designed to increase knowledge of backyard hens. As a result an increasing number of specialist Associated Practices are now available to hen owners seeking treatment.

Ultimately, the British Hen Welfare Trust is working towards the day when everyone views hens as pets, not just livestock, and sees them for the life enriching, intelligent birds they can be. This is exactly why we save hens from slaughter, and enjoy watching them become much-loved family members.

So go on, think about giving some hens a happy home and start reaping the rewards immediately – there are thousands of hens sat patiently waiting in their cages, hoping that you will. ♦



'Lucky' - one of the charmed re-homed hens