



BHWT volunteer Victoria Appleton at a rehoming in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset

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in the same way that one might take pride in a well-trained dog, it is thrilling to see the physical manifestation of all the care and affection that will have been lavished on any newly adopted girls.

That being said, there are plenty of other restorative benefits to keeping hens, and I believe all chickens, not just rescue birds, have the potential to increase the happiness of those who look after them. Hen-keeping has grown enormously in popularity over recent years, and the appeal of a garden flock isn't just about a ready supply of fresh eggs (although that is much appreciated).

Personal connection

So what is it about hens in particular that proves to be so appealing? It's widely believed that keeping a pet of any species can have a positive effect on one's mental welfare – companionship, responsibility and routine can all improve a person's outlook and attitude – but hens also connect us with nature, with the seasons, and, in a roundabout way, with our own selves. James Dean probably expressed this phenomenon best: 'Studying cows, pigs and chickens can help an actor develop his character... there are a lot of things I learned from animals. One was that they couldn't hiss or boo me.' It sounds flippant, but I think he had a point. In watching the chickens interact with their surroundings, and with each other, I find that I also learn about human beings, sociability and what it means to lead a satisfying life. In short, the girls teach me to be content, and they do it (almost) completely uncritically.

What's more, they do it with great humour. Few people realise how funny hens can be and yet there can't be many sights more slapstick than that of a chicken running after a fly, or more easily captioned than a group of girls scabbling about for windfall apples. No cat I know would, willingly, stand to be the butt of so many jokes. And, of course, all that laughter leads to increased levels of so-called happy hormones which, coupled with the extra vitamin D you'll be enjoying courtesy of the fresh air and sunshine, is bound to buoy even the most downhearted.

All of these advantages are from such undemanding creatures. On a practical level, chickens require relatively little from us. They need somewhere clean, dry and safe to sleep, a ready supply of food and water, access to the outdoors, and regular handling. I shut my girls in their coop at night and let them out again first thing in the morning. True, it can mean an early rise in the summer, but what a lovely way to start the day. The only danger

in keeping hens is that it can prove to be an addictive pastime. There are countless apocryphal tales of individuals who have tentatively purchased a trio of hens only to find themselves so taken with the creatures that they quickly expand their flock or start collecting rare breeds.

Although there are no official figures for the number of hens kept as pets in the UK, the BHWT has rehomed over 550,000 ex-commercial ladies since its formation in 2005. And with just over two-thirds of adopters being new to hen-keeping they frequently prove to be ideal for those without previous experience of poultry. 'Adopting some of these retired hens is one of the best things you will ever do,' says the charity's founder Jane Howorth, adding, 'they are endearing, inquisitive and love to be part of family life. My own hens greet me with contented clucks, much as a dog wags its tail and a cat wraps itself round the legs of its owner in greeting.'

From my vantage point, here on the grass, I couldn't agree more. As I produce those treats that I brought with me, the guttural chanting stops and there's a hesitant pause in conversation as the girls take me in. Smooth, considered movements break into jaunty dances of joy and I'm soon surrounded by my beautiful, red-brown hens who are happy, healthy and making the most of their freedom. If you're looking for a companion, and a bit of good karma to boot, there can't be many more spiritually satisfying hobbies than this. Here's to happy hens, and, possibly, even happier hen-keepers.

Words: Victoria Pickett

If the thought of keeping your own chickens appeals, and you'd like to provide a safe and loving home to some ex-commercial hens, head to the BHWT's website at bhwt.org.uk. It has a complete guide to getting started, information on expanding a flock, and what to expect on collection day, as well as details of the charity, its aims and achievements to date.