



Born to be wild: why free-range eggs are still best

FREE-RANGE hens have a far better quality of life than their caged cousins, campaigners have insisted. Last week, Prof Christine Nicol of the University of Bristol caused a stir by suggesting that not all free-range-egg producers meet the welfare standards consumers expect, pointing to lower mortality rates and stress levels among the caged birds surveyed.

'The problem is that the management of free-range systems in the UK at the moment is so variable,' she explains. 'Although you get some brilliant farms, you also get some that are really, really not good.'

Jane Howorth, founder of the British Hen Welfare Trust (www.bhwt.org.uk; 01884 860084)—which has rehomed nearly 400,000 hens since 2005—concur: 'Husbandry is of

paramount importance, no matter what system hens are kept in,' she says. 'It's all down to individual management. There is no doubt that well-run colony-cage units [which house some 50% of British hens] offer improved welfare over the battery-cage system, which was banned in 2012.'

'However, free range gives birds greater freedom to express their natural behaviour,' adds Mrs Howorth, who advocates smaller flocks and traditional stockmanship. 'Hens are inquisitive by nature—they like to go outside to rootle about, yet they want to feel safe and secure from predation, so they're more likely to venture out into open paddocks if farmers plant tree cover.'

Encouraging consumers to buy high-end brands such as Happy Egg or Sainsbury's Woodland, Mrs Howorth adds: 'Hens offer so much more with

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their feathers intact. They're such endearing, enchanting, intelligent and fun creatures. They give you a lovely, tasty breakfast or a delicious home-baked cake. They're also great stress busters—if you've had a tough day in the office, there's nothing better than hanging out with your hens. They're nowhere near as daft as people think they are.' *PL*



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