**Gallus gallus domesticus**

**Domestic Chicken**

*Class:* Aves  *Order:* Galliformes  *Family:* Phasianidae

**Other names:**

**Physical Description:** The most abundant bird in the world, the domestic chicken, comes in a wide range of colors and sizes. There are over 60 recognized breeds of chicken world-wide. All chickens share some characteristics such as squat stature, rounded bodies, dense feathers, wattles of flesh around the face. Adult males have large, distinct combs of red flesh, while females possess much smaller combs. Roosters are also typically adorned with striking plumage including flowing tails and shiny, pointed feathers. Roosters may have spurs on their legs, used in battles with other males. Adult size varies with breed. Bantams are smaller than “regular chickens.”

The **Wyandotte**: is a medium sized bird with a rose comb and clean legs. This breeds’ feathers are broad and loosely fitting. The area around the vent is very fluffy. The legs are yellow, although some may be grey. Wyandottes are very vocal, uttering soft clucks on a regular basis. This breed is noted for being incredibly friendly, and easy maintainable. The first appeared in 1870s. Wyandottes are docile and dual-purposed; breed kept for their brown eggs and for meat. According to the Wyandotte Breeders of America, "The Wyandotte breed is named for a Native American tribe in New York State. Origin: USA and Australia.

The **Silkie**: is a breed of chicken named for its atypically fluffy plumage, which is said to feel like silk. Their feathers lack functioning barbicels; similar to down feathers. Due to this odd feather structure, Silkies are unable to fly. This breed has several other unusual qualities, such as dark blue flesh and bones, blue earlobes, and five toes on each foot, whereas most chickens only have four. Silkies are well known for their calm, friendly temperament and are considered an ideal pet. Hens make good mothers and are commonly used to hatch eggs from other breeds and bird species. Origin: China

**Diet in the Wild:** Wild chickens are omnivores, gobbling insects, seeds, lizards, worms, berries, leaves and young mice.

**Diet at the Zoo:** Turkey finisher, scratch, mealworms

**Habitat & Range:** Chickens are found world wide as domestic animals.

**Life Span:** Chickens on average live 7-8 years but some birds have been documented to live as long as 14-15 years of age.

**Perils in the wild:** Snakes, birds of prey, many mammals such as weasels, raccoons, coyotes, and skunks

**Physical Adaptations:**
- Roosters have spurs that they will use to defend their flock.
- Can fly short distances to escape predators
- Chicken claws are relatively short and not greatly curved and serve the function of scratching.
- Chickens perch with strong feet, coupled with flexor tendons in their legs

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Behavioral Adaptations:
- Diurnal
- Live domestically, large groups
- Roosters will crow to alert other males about their territory.
- Hens will cluck after laying an egg and also use this vocalization to gather their chicks.
- Individual chickens in a flock will dominate others, establishing a "pecking order", with dominant individuals having priority for food access and nesting locations.
- Chickens live in social groups; consist of a dominant rooster and hens with their offspring.
- Some juvenile roosters will be tolerated until they reach maturity and begin to compete with the resident rooster. Within their social group there is a distinct dominance hierarchy or pecking order. In the peck order, the dominant birds get first access to food, nesting locations, and roosting spots. The subordinate birds wait until the dominant birds leave the area before they will approach.

Reproduction and Development:
- Males are polygamous, which means they will mate with as many females as they are able to. A dominant rooster will often have a group of hens, or harem, that he will guard and prevent other roosters from mating with. Roosters perform a mating "dance" where they drag their wing across the ground as they walk around the hen.
- Hens start laying eggs at about 22 weeks of age, at the rate of one per day for 14 months. Then the rate declines. Hens lay eggs with or without fertilization by a rooster. Today, most eggs that are to be hatched are hatched in incubators.
- Egg incubation takes 18-21 days.
- Chicks develop an "egg tooth" with which they use to help break the shell while going through the hatching process. This sharp projection falls off within a day or two of hatching.
- Chicks are precocial (body covered with downy feathers and able to feed themselves).
- Since chicks can move about very soon after hatching and feed themselves, parental responsibilities are confined to brooding chicks, guiding them towards food sources and watching for predators. Hens are attentive mothers, who will care for their chicks by sitting on them or by using their wings to shield chicks from harsh weather or danger.

Additional Information:
- Chickens pick up food with their sharp beaks. They swallow it whole. Extra food is stored in the crop. The gizzard (stomach) grinds and “chews” the food by means of a rough lining in the wall along with grit, sand and small stones that the chickens had ingested.
- Humans are thought to have domesticated the chicken from the wild red junglefowl which is found in Asia. The exact date of domestication of the chicken is a subject of debate. Some paleontologists originally fixed the date at 4000 years ago at a site in Pakistan. However, later discoveries of chicken bones at Neolithic sites at the mouth of the Yellow River in China push the date back to about 7,500 years ago. The wild red junglefowl was not native to that arid region of China and the latest research suggests that domestication may have taken place even earlier in what is now Vietnam and Thailand where wild junglefowl can be found.
- The phrase "bird brain" is proving not to be accurate. Many researchers have been surprised at the intelligence demonstrated by the domestic chicken. They recognize other members of their flock from facial features have over 20 distinct vocalizations and have demonstrated that they
understand that when an object is hidden, it still exists. This is something that is beyond the capacity of young children!

- Researcher Carolynn Smith suggests that the wattles help a rooster gain a hen’s attention when he is tidbitting; making sounds and moving their head up and down, picking up and dropping a bit of food.

**Conservation Status:** Least concern

**Sources:**
- Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens
- [http://www.philadelphiazoo.org/zoo/Meet-Our-Animals/Birds/Penguins/Domestic-Chicken.htm](http://www.philadelphiazoo.org/zoo/Meet-Our-Animals/Birds/Penguins/Domestic-Chicken.htm)
- [http://www.lpzoo.org/animals/factsheet/domestic-chicken](http://www.lpzoo.org/animals/factsheet/domestic-chicken)
- [http://urbanext.illinois.edu/eggs/res13-feet.html](http://urbanext.illinois.edu/eggs/res13-feet.html)