



# THE ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO CHICKENS

How to choose them

...

How to keep them



*Foreword by*  
*HRH The Prince of Wales*

Celia Lewis



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How to choose them – How to keep them



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*Buff Orpington  
hen with chicks*



## CLARENCE HOUSE

As Patron of both the Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the Poultry Club of Great Britain, I could not be more pleased to have been invited to contribute the foreword to this beautiful book, *An Illustrated Guide to Chickens*.

My family's interest in poultry goes back to my Great Great Great Grandmother, Queen Victoria, who was presented with a flock of the first Brahmas ever seen in this country. I understand their great size caused quite a stir! My Grandmother, Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, kept Buff Orpingtons and was enormously proud of her Patronage of the Buff Orpington Society. In my own case, ever since I was a child and used to collect eggs from the farm at Windsor, I have had an interest in chickens and have continued the family tradition at Highgrove with both Marans and Welsummers.

It is a mark of the times in which we live that some fifty breeds of chicken are now endangered and I hope and pray that this book, which is filled with practical information on keeping birds, will draw attention to their plight and encourage existing and new breeders to play their part in rebuilding their numbers.

# Introduction

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Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Science has now come up with an answer to this riddle. It seems that all new species develop from a genetic mutation; if this is successful for survival then the new genes are passed on to following generations and a new species is born. The first chicken was a mutation of its avian parents and its life began in the egg before it hatched. So it was the egg that came first and hatched into what eventually became the Red Junglefowl or *Gallus gallus* of South-east Asia, one of four distinct wildfowl, which is thought to be the ancestor of all domestic fowl.

There are historical references to some kind of domestic fowl as far back as 3000 BC, and by 1400 BC the Chinese and Egyptians had invented crude incubators from clay that hatched vast numbers of chicks at a time. Alexander the Great is credited with introducing chickens to Europe around 500 BC and the Romans continued to spread them far and wide. At first they were raised more for cockfighting than anything else, a sport that was popular worldwide.

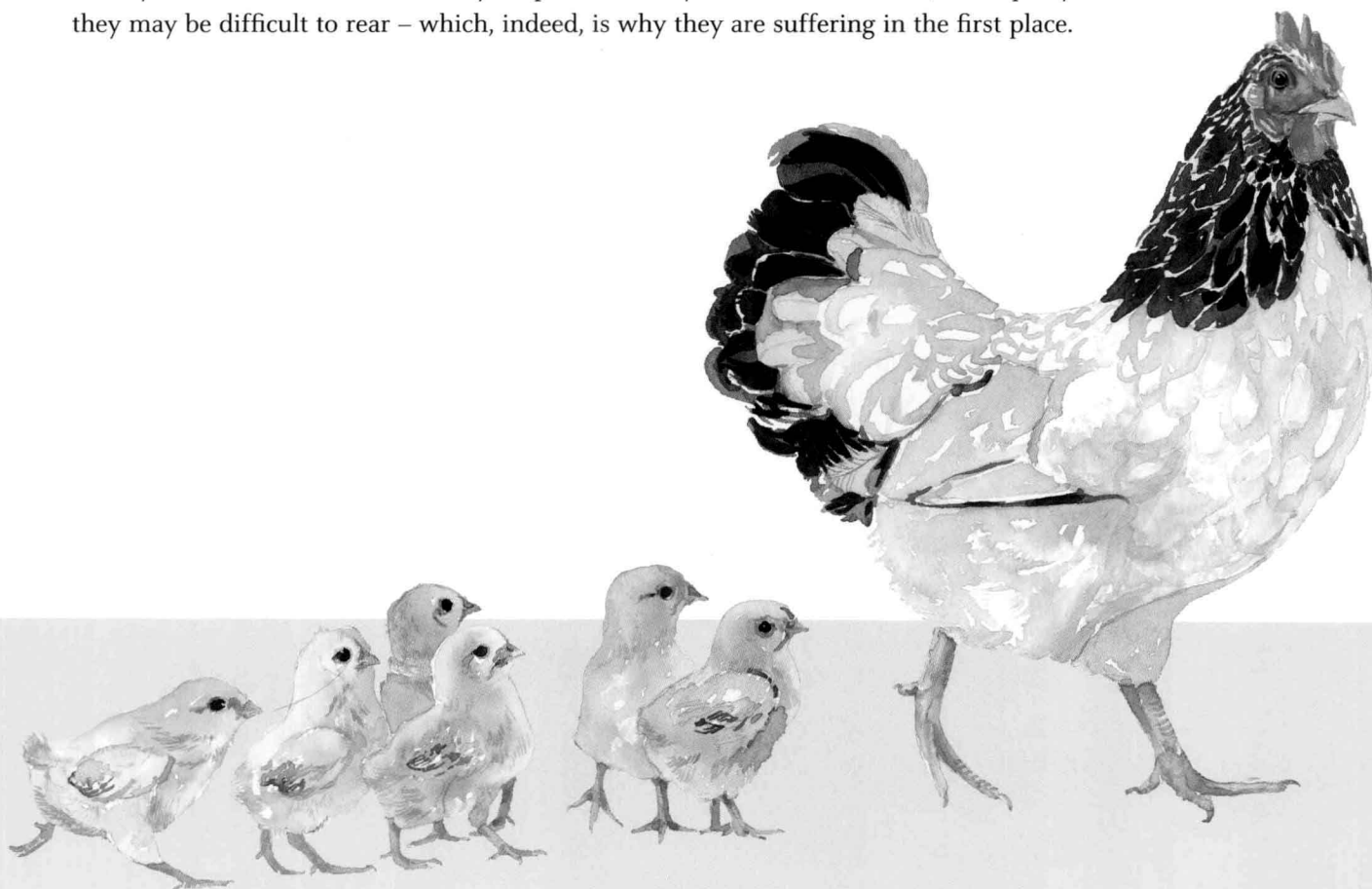
Cockfighting is a fight between two cockerels whose natural aggression causes them to fight to the death, either using their own natural spurs or, more commonly, with razor-sharp blades known as cockspurs or gaffs attached to their legs. The fight only ends when one bird is killed or is too tired to continue, and in many cases the victor is so severely injured that it dies as well. Cockfighting is now illegal in the UK and most of Europe and the USA.

Eventually poultry reached Britain, probably introduced by the Romans, though it is possible they had already arrived by other means, and were eventually introduced to the New World. The Conquistadors found poultry already established in South America, probably brought by Polynesian traders when they arrived in the early 15th century. They soon spread north and were added to by the French settlers in Canada and colonists from England.

Nowadays there are literally hundreds of breeds of chickens all over the world. The following pages will give you an insight and hopefully help you make a selection.

Chickens are a joy to keep; they are adaptable creatures and whether you are lucky enough to be able to let them free range or have to keep them in a coop, there will be a breed to suit you. There can be little that compares with the sight and sound of a magnificent cockerel or mother hen with her 12 little troopers following obediently in her wake. They will eat up all your leftovers and turn them into delicious nourishing eggs – finding your first new-laid one will be a thrill and collecting them daily will remain a pleasure.

Sadly many of the older breeds are now in danger of extinction but some stock does still remain and it is within anyone's power to help preserve them. The rarer the breed the more you will be able to ask for any surplus stock if you wish to sell some, but equally they may be difficult to rear – which, indeed, is why they are suffering in the first place.



## *Choosing the right chickens*

Having decided hens are for you, your next decisions will be hybrids or pure bred, large fowl or bantam? Do you want eggs or meat? Are they for show? Nearly all breeds of hen have a bantam equivalent; there are also several breeds that are pure bantam with no large version. Bantams make delightful pets and can become very tame – and they obviously need less space than their larger cousins. Most breeds will go broody frequently, making very good mothers, but they do lay very small eggs.



*Adult hen*



*Pullet*



*Bantam*

A hybrid is a cross of two or more breeds that have been carefully selected to produce birds with prolific egg-laying tendencies. There are many well-known hybrids and there will be a breeder near you that stocks one or more. A hybrid will be the most economic egg-producing machine, so if you don't want chicks or a cockerel then these are for you as they very rarely go broody and would not breed true.

Pure breeds won't lay quite as many eggs as hybrids and some will tend to go broody, but you will be able to breed from them. It can be very rewarding to keep a rare breed and help preserve a species. Pure breeds come in an amazing array of colours, characters,

shapes and sizes, some being better layers than others, some producing better carcasses and some just looking extraordinary.



Pure breeds are broken down into soft feather and hard feather. The soft feather again comes in large, small and bantam – these are predominantly layers, though some are termed dual purpose if they produce a good meaty carcass as well. The Mediterranean breeds, such as Ancona or Leghorn, tend not to go broody, have white ear lobes and lay good numbers of white eggs. Asian soft feather are characteristically large with fluffy feathers and feathery legs, such as Brahma, Cochin and Langshan. The Asian gamefowl all have hard, tight feathering, are aggressive (as they were developed to fight) and tend to go broody frequently while laying few eggs – this is not to say they are unpopular, as even though cockfighting has been banned since 1849 there is plenty of competition in showing and these birds have strong and charming characters that endear them to their owners. It must be borne in mind, however, that they have been bred as fighting birds and this they will do. They can only be kept in pairs or trios and no new birds can be introduced as they will simply not be accepted.

# How the book works

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Over the following pages 100 breeds of chicken are described, with illustrations. All individual breeds have different character strains within them so please note that the descriptions given are a guide only and where a hen is described perhaps as being flighty, this will be the general characteristic of that breed; certain lines of the same breed may be calm, but they will be the minority.

The illustrations are typical types of each breed, but if you are thinking of showing your birds then you should consult your country's breed standard (see below).

TYPE	CLASS	ORIGIN	EGG COLOUR	STATUS
Layer	Soft feather light	Europe	White	Common
COMB TYPE	FEATHER COLOURING	BROODY	NO. OF EGGS/YEAR	BREED STANDARD
Rose	Gold pencilled Silver spangled White Black	Not often	Prolific	PCGB APA Europe

**TYPE:** whether the breed is suitable for laying eggs – **layer** – or will lay few eggs but produce a fine carcass – **table**. It may lay plenty of eggs and also produce a good carcass, known as 'dual purpose', or could be purely **ornamental**.

**CLASS:** game birds and Asian gamefowl are classed as **hard feather**, which means they have short feathers so tight to their bodies that in some cases the skin shows through. **Soft feather**, where the plumage is looser and fluffier, comes in two sizes, light and heavy – **light** being mainly birds of Mediterranean origin that are excellent layers and **heavy** those larger breeds that are frequently dual purpose. **True bantams** are birds that have no large equivalent – most large breeds having a bantam equivalent.

**ORIGIN:** where the breed first originated.

**EGG COLOUR:** which colour or colours of egg are produced by the breed.

**STATUS:** whether the breed is common, fairly common or rare. In this context rare means probably fewer than 500 breeding females in existence – in some cases considerably less than that.

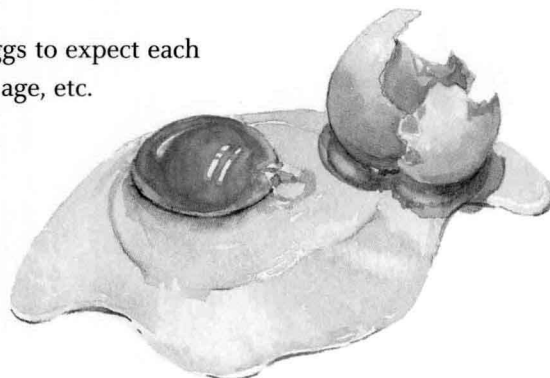
**COMB TYPE:** breed found with one or more of the six types of comb.

**FEATHER COLOURING:** each breed may come in several different colourways.

**BROODY:** whether the breed tends to go broody frequently, occasionally or not at all.

**NO. OF EGGS/YEAR:** a loose guide to give an idea of how many eggs to expect each year. N.B. this is dependent on many things, such as food, comfort, age, etc.

0–50	very few
50–100	few
100–150	moderate
150–200	prolific
200 or more	very prolific



**BREED STANDARD:** whether the breed is recognised by a particular poultry organisation and has a standard, meaning that a set of detailed guidelines are laid down with exacting details of plumage, head and leg colouring, etc., with a scale of points for judging and serious defects.

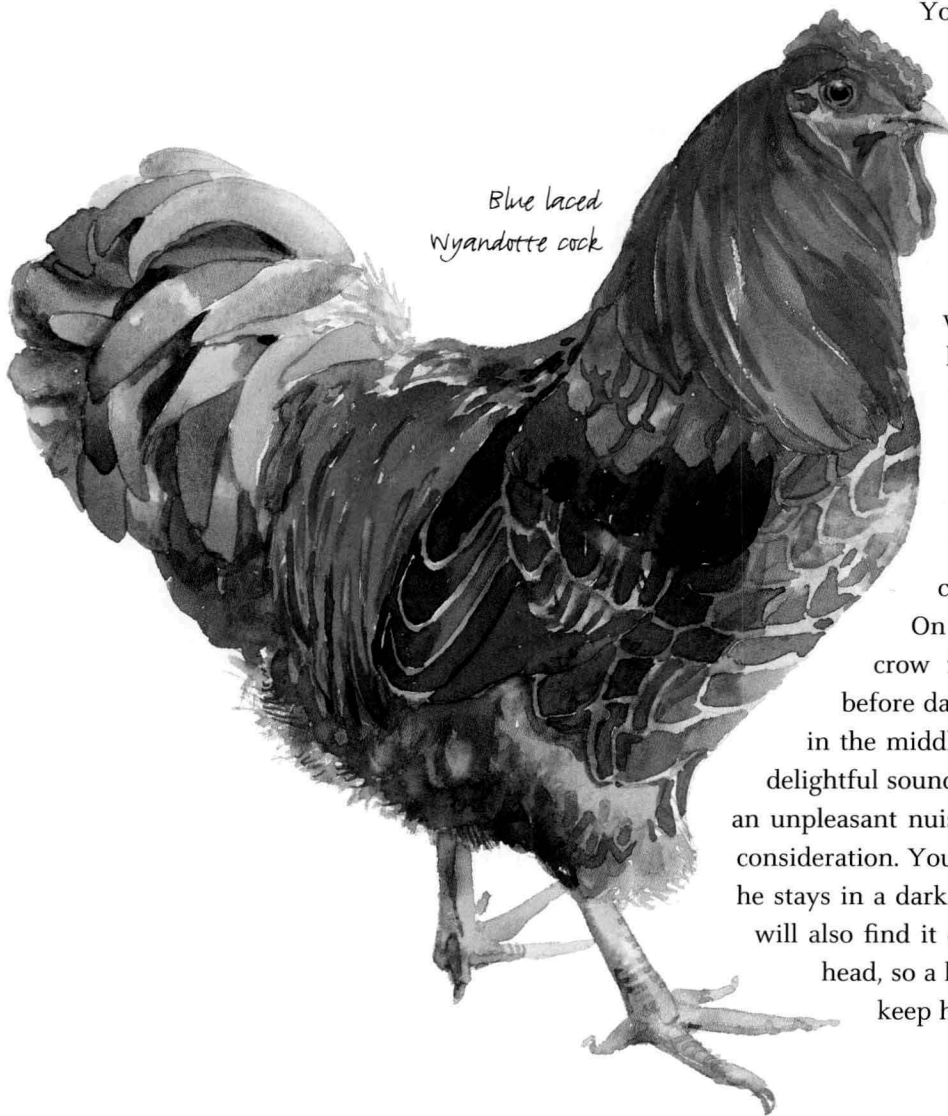
**PCGB:** Poultry Club of Great Britain

**APA:** American Poultry Association

**Europe:** Various European countries have a standard for this breed

# Cocks or cockerels

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*Blue laced  
Wyandotte cock*

You do not need a cock (known as a cockerel until his first moult) for your hens to lay eggs; this they will do anyway, but without one they will not be fertile.

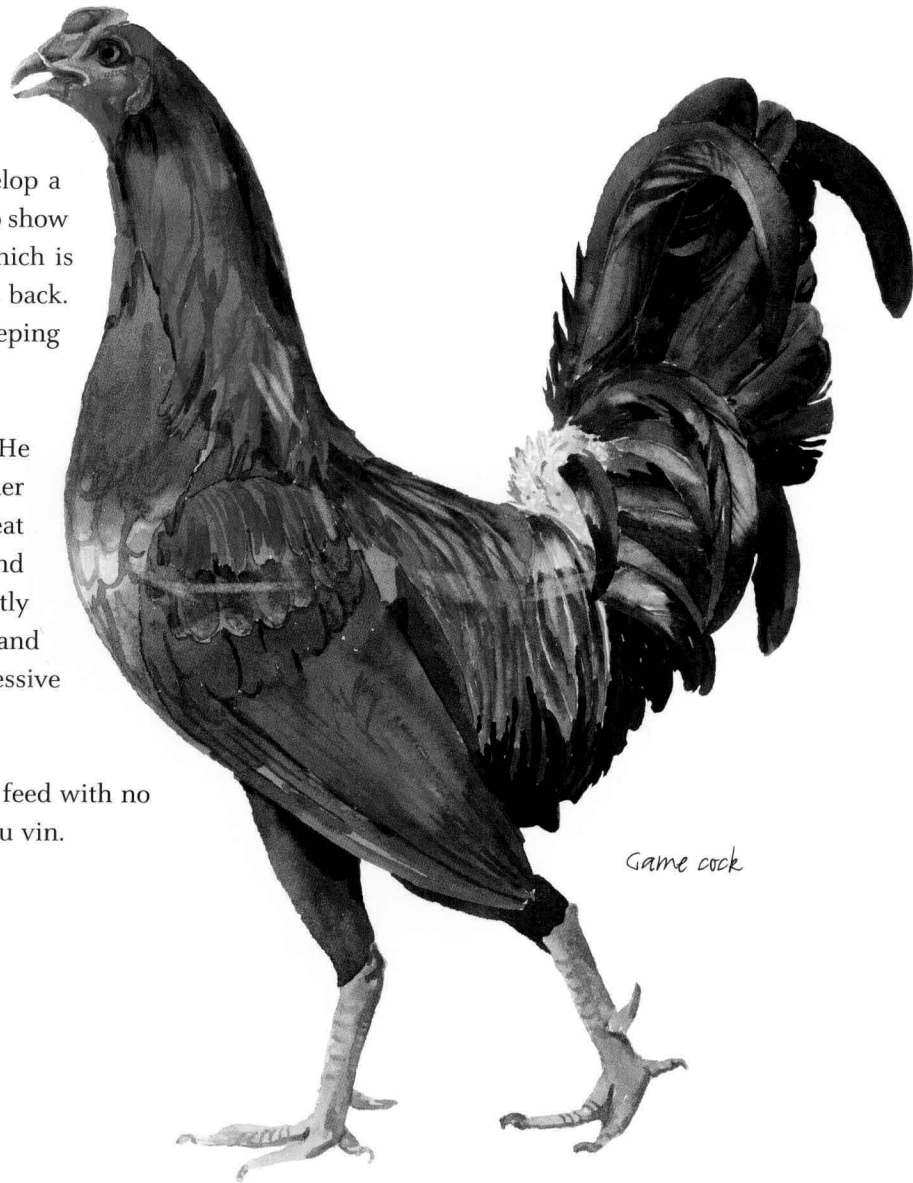
There are definite pros and cons to keeping a cock. On the pro side you will be able to hatch chicks, he will look magnificent and to an extent he will protect his flock from predators, or at least be the first line of defence. He will also be charming to the hens, calling them over when he finds some food – he has an ulterior motive, of course, but the hens always respond.

On the con side he will crow. He will crow frequently during the day and start before dawn – various bantam cocks even crow in the middle of the night. To some this will be a delightful sound of the country but to others it will be an unpleasant nuisance, so this should be an important consideration. You can keep him quieter by making sure he stays in a dark henhouse until a reasonable hour; he will also find it difficult to crow if he can't lift up his head, so a high perch or cramped conditions may keep him quiet to an extent.

Another con is that if you only have three or four hens his favourite one may suffer from his attentions and develop a bare back and neck – if you are wanting to show your birds you can acquire a ‘saddle’, which is a sort of light cover that fits on the hen’s back. A cock can service at least ten hens so keeping six or more should spread his attentions.

Finally, he may very well be aggressive. He will certainly be aggressive towards another cockerel but he may also find you a threat and take, literally, to attacking the hand that feeds him. Plenty of cocks are perfectly friendly, particularly the larger breeds, and even gamefowl tend only to be aggressive towards their own kind.

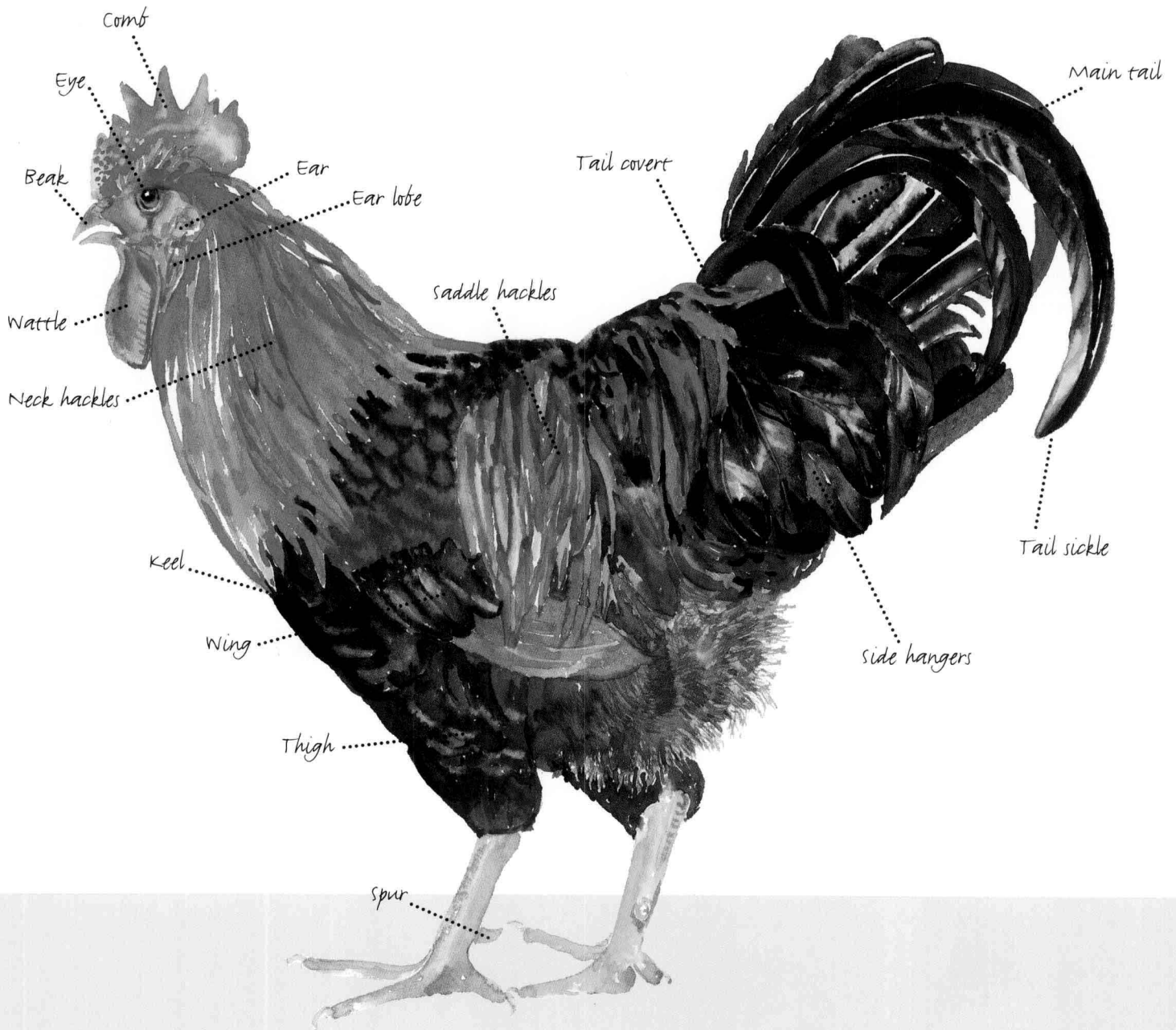
Don’t forget he will be another mouth to feed with no return – unless you are considering coq au vin.



*Game cock*

# Parts of a chicken

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# Combs

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The comb is the red fleshy growth on the top of a chicken's head and is usually larger in the cockerel. It is one of the distinguishing features of each breed and comes in many varieties. Chickens cannot sweat and so blood pumping through the exposed comb and wattles naturally cools the rest of the body. It is also a useful signal of the overall health of the bird and in the hen indicates whether or not she is in lay.



*in lay*



*Not in lay*

**Single:** the most common type of comb. Single combs come in many sizes, may be upright or flop to one or both sides and are usually larger in the cockerel. There may be different numbers of serrations or spikes.



*single*



*Twisted single*



*single to one side*

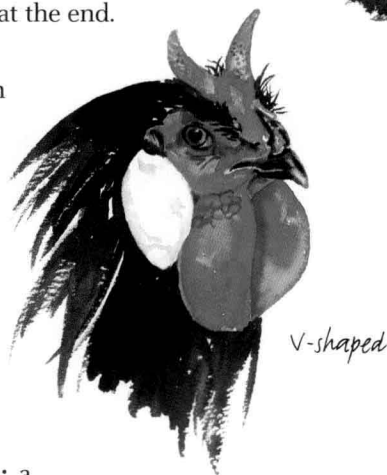
**Rose:** the second most common type found. Rose combs cover the top of the head like a flat cap with a tapering spike at the back and are covered in small round knobbles. The spike may follow the line of the neck, be horizontal or turn up at the end.



**Pea or triple:** a low comb with three ridges, the middle one slightly higher than the other two and covered with small pea-like protuberances.



**V-shaped:** this is made up of two horn-like growths joined at the base.



**Walnut or cushion:** a small comb with no spikes or protuberances – sits rather forward on the chicken's head.



**Cup:** this is really two single combs joined at the front and back and resembles a crown.

