



Chicken talk

Which Chicken House?

By
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*BELOW: Silkies in an open pen.
 Photo by Richard Lutwyche*

Having decided on the breed of chicken to keep now is the time to look at housing them.

Like chickens, there are a wide variety of options to consider. The main issue is keeping the fox from eating your lovely birds. Whether you are in a rural or urban area, have or have not seen one about, or the neighbours declare they have never had their chickens taken, believe me, they will cause devastation and heartbreak sooner or later. Mink and badgers are also a problem, although not as common a predator as the fox, but

just as lethal as they are extremely difficult to keep out. As a rule the fox will strike between dusk and dawn.

Daytime raids cannot be excluded when a traveling dog fox passes by in early spring or while the vixen is feeding cubs later on.

Quite a few years ago I called on Tom Bartlett at Folly Farm to replace some birds after Mr Fox had paid me a visit. The devastation was so great that the subject was my only topic of conversation that day. There I met a fascinating poultry-keeping gentleman,





who was actually dressed as a lady. I asked where he was from and how he protected his birds from this terrible fate. The answer was North Wales and he explained that he and his fellow believers prayed to the relevant spirit who did the

business. In fact I knew the exact place he was from as it was very near to where my mum lived. The keeper on the smart pheasant shoot next door to the commune was renowned for being 'zero fox tolerant' and I suspect far more

ABOVE LEFT: Triangular fold units are ideal for these bantams. Photo by Richard Lutwyche.

ABOVE: The ultimate chicken ark built by friends of mine. Most homemade housing will not keep out predators but this one is nearly perfect.

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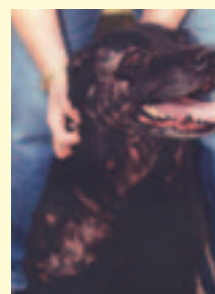
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effective than those spirits!

Firstly, think about your lifestyle at present. (Although more fun to consider the post-lottery winning lifestyle, we must be realistic!) Does the job/family commitment make shutting up before nightfall without fail a bit tricky? How much land do you have available? Is there a garden that the chickens might destroy, their legs working like pistons after what just may be the juiciest worm between here and Australia?

Fold units - houses with runs attached - are very useful if you want to maintain some order to your garden and indeed your life. Also if you are unable to shut them up before dark they are not prey to the opportunist predator. Mink can get in over or under through the smallest of holes or cracks. A fox or badger can rip through wire mesh and would if your birds were not shut up at night. With the fold system space is limited for the chickens and the unit does require moving regularly. Also, they are expensive but you do appreciate it when you try to either make one yourself, or economize with a cheap version, or realize how much thought has gone into the design, or see just how well your chickens are

doing ie lots of eggs and no vet's bills.

From experience I get a huge sense of foreboding when people buy chickens from me and declare that the price of housing is so shocking they will make one themselves. The result is not always good. The end product can be flimsy and neither fox proof nor waterproof.

Bad ventilation causes health problems for the birds. Design is important; a lovely looking nest box but her ladyship either can't or won't lay in it is no good to anybody. Also, if it is difficult to clean out, it doesn't get cleaned out - human nature!

The expense of the materials quickly defeats the object of the operation. Lastly making it can be very stressful when you realize that it is not as easy as it had seemed to begin with, and on some occasions verges on grounds for divorce.

Friends of ours did just this after deciding on chickens as the ideal Christmas present for the lady of the house. The hubby (ex Hong Kong Police, ex RAF - Wing Commander no less with recently acquired PhD doctorate under his belt, in between working at new job - something mysterious to do with security) teamed up with a computer genius

ABOVE: "The square sided ones are more practical for general use". Note the hatch to close at night.

Photo by Richard Lutwyche

neighbour to construct THE ultimate chicken ark. The result was astoundingly wonderful. My suggestion that all previous careers had been a waste of their obvious talents went unheeded. Sadly I don't think my order of 20 of the same was taken seriously.

The style they chose was one with an upstairs house and ramp. Ideal for the Dutch Bantams they put in it. However ramps are not suitable for heavier breeds or chickens with feathered or short legs. For these, ground level houses are best.

What shape? Triangular ones are attractive but would not suit a breed with a head dress such as Polish or Appenzellers or cockerels with large tail feathers (sickles).

Chickens such as New Hampshire Reds, Pekin Bantams or Old English Game would be fine in this sort of fold unit. The square sided ones are more practical for general use and I find it very handy to have a hatch to allow them out if you are at hand to shut them up at their bedtime.

At The Butts Farm we have a 2-acre enclosure surrounded by a 10ft high wire netting fence with 2 strands of electric wire on the outside energized by mains supply. No, we are not entering into the

realms of post-lottery wins. The decision to make a permanent enclosure was made when we moved to The Butts Farm.

I had kept chickens for most of my life and hope to continue doing so for a lot longer but starting a family was not going to make chicken keeping any easier. So much time and money is wasted when your birds are not adequately protected. I am delighted to say after 14 years it has proved to 100% effective and worthwhile. The use of an electric fence is an ideal deterrent for foxes and badgers, certainly at night and mains powered is best as they can tell when the pulse is weak from a low battery and will risk getting a little zap for the promise of a murdering spree. Care must be taken if children or the public have access. Just in case the fox decides to dig his way in we have a skirt of chicken wire 4ft around the base of the fence. It is best just to lay this on top of the ground and secure it with pegs to start with until it has grown into the grass. Some advise you to lay it under ground but we have found that if the predator finds it after the first few scratches it will not persist. If it has got quite a way before it hits the wire it is more inclined to continue and rip through

the wire.

Within our enclosure we use a variety of fold units as well as a number of open pens. These are approximately 20 yards by 10 yards and accommodate a breeding group of 3 to 6 birds throughout the year. Some of the light breeds are inclined to fly into someone else's pen. In spring it can be a like French farce at our place, but there is nothing like a bit of wing clipping to curb an outbreak of wife swapping. Trim the primary flight feathers, (the long ones), back to the wing bar, (next row of short feathers), on one wing only which is painless. The feathers may or may not grow back again when the bird comes out of the moult in the autumn - they don't loose all their feathers every year. If they do grow back and the chicken hasn't got used to staying in its own pen, repeat the process. Some just will not stay in open pens - who mentioned Marsh Daisys? It is not advisable to clip the wings of a bird you are thinking of showing so into a fold unit for these birds.

I do hope this has been of help and given some 'food for thought'. In the next issue we will talk about feeding throughout the year, hatching and rearing.

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