

## The Buckeye Egg Farm Chickens

The Buckeye Egg farm is one of the world's largest egg factories, but on September 20th, tornadoes came through and demolished twelve of its buildings, trapping about a million birds in the rubble that remained.

Because of the way modern egg farms are set up, with rows and rows of chickens crammed in cages stacked one upon the other, five high, many of the birds were crushed to death when roofs and walls collapsed on them. Maybe they were lucky, for what followed in the aftermath is both a testament of human cruelty and of compassion.

Immediately after the storm passed, workers began loading the living that they were able to reach onto trucks for processing, and loading bucketful's of live chickens, cages and all, into dumpsters where they were either crushed to death or gassed. As soon as the animal protection community heard about the disaster, a nationwide rescue and adoption campaign began, and thankfully, the folks at Buckeye, from the CEO on down, cooperated, so that at least some of the hens could be saved, and placed in sanctuaries and loving homes. I was lucky enough to be involved in the campaign, and have so far adopted twenty-seven of these hens.

It has been said that commercially raised chickens are not like 'regular' chickens, and in many ways, this is true. Commercial animals of all types are genetically, nutritionally, medically, and physically manipulated and altered in ways that most people would be horrified to hear of, and to a certain extent, these alterations and manipulations do make them different from what Nature intended them to be. But this story illustrates how quickly a chicken, or any animal for that matter, can revert back to being 'regular,' once he or she has been removed from an unnatural environment.

I became involved with the rescue effort in the first week of October, when I drove to Illinois to rendezvous with a truck carrying some of the survivors across country. Because commercially raised hens are prone to illnesses, especially respiratory diseases, I had my chicken house remodeled prior to their arrival by putting up more roosts in the main room, and hanging doors on two small rooms where the girls could be quarantined for a few days.

In the aftermath of the tornadoes, those chickens that survived went without food or water for days and days. Even if they had been easy to reach, an operation like Buckeye has no way of feeding or watering once the electricity is off, for in a battery system, everything is done automatically, and many of the birds were buried in rubble and under layer upon layer of cages.

At one point early on in the rescue, the effort was suspended by Buckeye as demolition crews came in with heavy equipment to clear out the wreckage. At

that point the helpless inhabitants of the battered cages were scooped up in front end loaders, loaded into trucks and hauled off to a landfill to be buried (alive.) Because there were still hens in other areas that could be reached, the rescue resumed soon afterward, and more hens were saved. The rescue continues as I write this, more than a month after the tornadoes hit. At this point, 3,000 birds have been saved, and thousands more who have escaped their cages are being caught and cared for by people who believe that these chickens deserve a chance. The people who put their own lives on hold to go to rescue these chickens are to be commended, for they risked their own lives in some cases to free the birds.

The chickens I brought home with me had been through a lot, and I wasn't sure if they would ever recover from the traumas they had lived through. For one thing, they all been debeaked, some of them very badly, and I didn't now if this would interfere with their ability to eat or not.

Debeaking is the standard, and very cruel industry practice of slicing and searing off the beaks of week-old chicks destined to be laying hens. It is done by machine, and the human operator is expected to debeak about fifteen chicks a minute. Obviously, care and kindness cannot be considerations under these circumstances. When the hot blade is too dull, the hen will end up with what looks like lips rather than a beak. Several of my new chickens were victims of a too-dull blade. At first, when I saw how vigorously all the hens pecked, I was relieved and thankful that they were still able to eat and nourish themselves. It wasn't until I was watching them through a window up close that I realized that the hens with 'lips' had to peck as many as thirty times at the same object before they were finally able to get it into their mouths. The good news was that this disability only seemed to apply to tiny objects; the chopped corn I fed them seemed not to be a problem for them. The bad news is that chickens need to ingest tiny pieces of grit and gravel to properly digest their food, and without a working beak, this, and grooming, can become a real problem. I know that a chicken's beak will grow back as long as they are young, because most laying hens undergo debeaking twice in their short lives; once when they are very young, and once again at about twelve to twenty weeks of age. I have heard conflicting information about whether or not the beak continues to grow throughout a bird's life, so time will be the teller for these hens.

Within a few days the nervous, frightened chickens from the Buckeye Farm that I had taken in were eating out of my hand. Within a few more days I let them out of the quarantine rooms and waited to see if they would venture outside, and set their feet, that for so long had only touched the metal of their cages, onto the lush grass growing from the ground. It took most of them a couple of days to become brave enough to explore their new environment, but once they came out, they were hooked. The day I saw them taking 'dust baths'

was the day I knew that these girls were becoming ‘regular’ chickens, and I was grateful that I was able to witness their recovery.

They interacted well with the other hens, but their reaction to the roosters made me burst out laughing, for they acted nothing like the other hens. Normal hen interaction with roosters involves staying close to a rooster only when another rooster is after her, and demanding that she ‘assume the position’ and allow him to breed. At times like these, a rooster will intervene on a hen’s behalf and chase the other rooster away. Of course, roosters being roosters, the reprieve is short-lived, for as soon as the one is chased away, the rescuer becomes the pursuer, and quickly has his way with her.

But the Buckeye hens knew nothing of roosters, so when approached by either Louie or Julio, both beautiful boys with lusty appetites, they did not fly, they did not flee, and they most definitely did not ‘assume the position.’ What they did was stand their ground and greet the rooster with what looked to be admiration, and then quietly step up to him and begin, as if on cue, to *groom* him. And not just one hen at a time, either. These girls would take it upon themselves to work in unison and clean that boy from comb to tail-feathers, while the surprised rooster could only stand, still as a star, and let them pick away the specks of dust and whatever else his grand and glossy feathers contained. The first time I saw this I stood transfixed, and almost cried from happiness at seeing such a sight.

To watch the transformation these hens have undergone and will undoubtedly continue to undergo has been very rewarding to me. I am happy that I was able to help, even if the statistics of twenty-seven in a million do not sound, by themselves, very impressive. Still, to these twenty-seven, (and to the other few thousand survivors) the numbers don’t matter much; what matters is being a regular chicken.