The **STRANGE** world of a **BROODY HEN**

*Stuart Anderson, who has a smallholding in France, describes what he has learned about broody hens ... and gentlemanly cockerels!*
However comprehensive a ‘raising poultry for beginners’ book is, and despite access to that wonderfully immediate encyclopaedia called the Internet, there are some things that they either don’t explain, or that your chickens do differently. Chickens might not be the brightest creatures around, but they are socially sophisticated and can be very entertaining to observe as they go about their daily business. After three years of keeping chickens, here are a few things our hens have taught us about their broody behaviour, with an honourable mention for gentlemen cockerels.

**Going broody**

It seems to us that it’s hormonal. Adult hens lay eggs, and then there comes a time when they go broody and sit. And broody hens will sit on nothing and not budge, as firmly as they’ll sit on a clutch of eggs.

Just before they become broody, they may change their behaviour and stop laying in the nest box - where you conveniently collect their eggs each day - and find a hiding place, where they’ll lay an egg a day until they have a clutch, whereupon they stop laying, start sitting and go missing. Or, they continue to lay in the nest box, so you see no change to the routine until one day she sits down and doesn’t leave.

They also persuade other hens to lay in their nest. The largest clutch we found was of 22 eggs, which we reduced to a more manageable dozen, 11 of which went on to hatch out into a variety of different coloured chicks.

Perhaps you have noticed that you’re not collecting the same amount of eggs as usual each day from their nest box and your suspicions are aroused. Then one evening, when it’s time to round up your free-range flock into their fox-proof henhouse for the night, you notice a hen missing.

You check out the usual places, call to her, rattie the food bucket, and all to no avail. Your heart sinks as you think you’ve lost her to a fox or a dog.

However, the following day, you catch a glimpse of her at feeding time. But then she disappears again. Putting two and two together, you realise she’s gone broody and native at the same time. You continue your sleuthing, patiently tracking her when she slopes off after feeding, and leads you back to her nest.

With the help of an assistant, you then grab her and carefully pick up all the warm eggs, transferring them into a nest box with enclosed run - we use our chicken tractor - where she can sit in safety for the rest of her ‘pregnancy’.

Accommodating your broody hen

Conventional practice is to build a number of individual nest boxes, but we read some good advice in Michael Roberts’ *Poultry House Construction* that hens often like to lay in the same place and can end up squeezing into the same box, with a risk of broken eggs. We therefore built one long nest box (the size of four standard nest boxes, side-by-side) with one entrance and no divisions. (the size of four standard nest boxes, side-by-side) with one entrance and no divisions.

We've found this works very well and, when we open the nest box each day, we usually find the eggs collected together, though sometimes with an odd one the other end of the box. If two hens are laying at the same time, they often cuddle up close, seemingly trying to squeeze into exactly the same place. The photo above shows four hens squeezed in together, two broody and the other two laying.

When one of our hens goes broody, we try to separate her from the others and perhaps add other eggs to make up a decent clutch, even swapping small bantam eggs for eggs from larger birds ... cuckoo!

Last spring, we had several of our hens go broody at the same time, using up all our alternative accommodation, so that our two Silkes ended up sharing the chicken tractor. As this happened all of a sudden, reducing our egg-laying population drastically; we hadn’t actually got enough eggs to put a decent clutch under each one.

The Silkes had only two eggs between them in their shared accommodation. One each? No! It was rather one on both and then, when she went for a drink and a bite to eat, the other one seized the opportunity to sit on the eggs. How did we know which was which? A dab of felt tip pen on one crest was helpful. When both eggs hatched out under one hen, they remained hers, the other hen staying in the chicken tractor in her new role as attentive aunty. There was no more sharing, as there had been with the eggs. It was always clear to see who was the real mum. I say real mum - whatever eggs hatch out under a hen, she’ll treat them as her own, which is, I suppose, how the cuckoo gets away with it.

We had something similar last year, again with the two Silkes, when one unfortunately lost her chick to a rogue tomcat. We tried to put her back with the rest of the flock in the henhouse, but each day when they were let out, she went straight to the chicken tractor. We let her back in, and she became aunty to the other Silke’s two chicks, the other hen tolerant of her ‘sister’.

This was surprising as hens with chicks can be very aggressive towards each other in being protective of their toddlers and the Silkes are particularly belligerent.
Chickens hatching out on different days

As I’ve said, hens lay an egg a day until they have a clutch to sit on. These eggs lay dormant while cold and the embryos only start developing when the hen begins to sit. In this way, eggs laid several days apart all hatch out together … mostly. We once had four chicks born on four successive days. So, don’t be too eager to discard un-hatched eggs. She’ll sit on her newborn chicks for long periods over the first few days, which can be enough to keep those other eggs alive.

Coming back into lay

Hens go from being broody automatically into mother mode when the eggs hatch. This happens, even if they’ve been sitting for less than the three weeks, due to your putting other, partially-sat eggs under her. They also stop being motherly and come back into lay. We’ve had bantams escorting round varieties and individual hens demonstrate adolescents considerably larger than themselves, but a Sussex left her young chicks looking very bewildered when the eggs every day. She sat there impassively, whether on an egg or not.

You can use this behaviour to your advantage, and this is where the dating of eggs comes into its own. If, for various reasons, a clutch doesn’t hatch out after three weeks or you discover, by ‘candling’, that the eggs are unfertile, you can put new eggs under the hen, who will continue to sit. We’ve had hens sit through six weeks, i.e., twice the normal gestation period of three weeks, and then hatch out chicks. That said, don’t discard a clutch of eggs on the 21st day without candling them to verify that they are infertile. In our experience, helped by dating the eggs, it can be three weeks plus a couple of days.

We’ve also had hens that have given up during the second sitting, leaving the eggs to go cold. A shame, of course, but you’ve got no control over it and it is worth a try. With the dates marked, if you’re vigilant and have other broody hens, you might be able to transfer the eggs to another sitting hen. Dates on the eggs are really useful as you can have a complete shuffle around of the eggs and the birds will all keep sitting. Separate accommodation is needed though, so each hen bonds to her chicks as they hatch.

The gentlemanly cock

In an article about broody hens, it’s right that I concentrate on the ladies, but the cockerel is involved in all this, if only for a cameo appearance. I’m being a little disingenuous as his role in the free-ranging flock is far greater than this brief walk-on – or should that be jump-on – part.

He is definitely the centre of the free-ranging flock and comes running if he hears a commotion from one of his hens, typically when they start squawking after laying an egg, their way of re-establishing contact with the foraging flock after having spent up to an hour passing the egg.

When our flock started free-ranging a little too far, we shut them into a paddock fenced with sheep netting. The smaller birds could pass through the holes in the mesh and the more portly Sussex ladies worked out that the holes get larger higher up the fence and that they could reach a big enough hole if they walked up the reinforcing struts for the fence. Cocks perhaps, but not quite so clever, Monsieur stayed put. The hens could therefore return to the henhouse to lay their eggs but otherwise preferred to be close to the cockerel, so were effectively restrained.

A behaviour we’ve been repeatedly impressed by is the cockerel’s philanthropy in the face of a tasty morsel. We first noticed it when sitting outside eating a barbeque. We tossed a couple of scraps from the table towards the inquisitive cock who, rather than gobbling it down, called over his hens and then picked up the morsel with his beak and threw it down in front of them.

All our cocks have exhibited this trait. He behaves the same in the henhouse if fed whole grain, calling the hens to him, then picking up a favoured maize grain and depositing it in front of a hen: amazingly gracious! It puts our ram to shame, who’ll brusquely barge his ewes out of the way to make sure he gets his face in the trough first.

The last tale of well-behaving cocks isn’t from our flock, but rather from our elderly French neighbour, the venerable Annick, who keeps a chaotic collection of chickens, bantams and rabbits, along with feeding a sizeable population of semi-feral cats. One of her bantam hens that had been sitting on a clutch of eggs for just short of three weeks went missing for unknown reasons. She was astonished to see that the bantam cock had worked out the problem and sat on the eggs, successfully hatching out the chicks a few days later. The hen did return but the cock remained on the scene, sharing parenting. To find out more, take a look at http://permacultureinbrittany.blogspot.com/

In all her considerable years of keeping chickens, she’s never seen that happen before, which rather goes to prove that there’s a lot more to chicken than you’ll find in books. It’s really worth taking the time to observe your flock, over and above their daily care. They’re delightful creatures that give us eggs and meat and a whole lot of entertainment too.

DO BROODY HENS NEED AN EGG TO SIT ON?

Despite doubling up the Silies, we had more broody hens than places to put them, so we had to leave one broody girl in the nest box. When other hens came in to lay their daily egg, the sitting bird would scoop them under her wing. When we had rounded up the other birds into the henhouse at the end of the day, we collected the fresh eggs from under the broody, leaving the two she was sitting on. She was apparently unperturbed by this daylight robbery.

How did we know which eggs were which? Here’s our top tip: when a hen starts sitting, write on the egg in felt-tip pen (pencil gets polished off as the hen turns her egg) the day it goes under a sitting hen and the date, three weeks hence, when it should hatch out (see photo). This is useful for other reasons, as I shall explain.

Our bantam and two Silies go broody regularly, and sometimes it’s just not convenient. We haven’t yet constructed an anti-broody coop (see Robert’s book) so, when we got a Silkie going broody as winter approached, we left her in the ordinary nest box and collected all the eggs every day. She sat there impassively, whether on an egg or not.

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