

Off The Beaten Path In Consideration of Haddam's Town Bird

by Kristin Ahearn

Chickens, I have decided, are the unofficial “town bird” here in Haddam. If you don’t have your own back-yard coop, you know someone who does. Fresh eggs are swapped among friends, and eagerly sold at roadside stands and at the wildly popular Higganum Village Market. Pet chickens of prize varieties—Bantams, Rhode Island Reds, Campines—are on full display at the Haddam Neck Fair. They’re pretty, they’re productive, and they live outside.

It’s easy to see why a growing number of people, like me, secretly harbor great desires to have a corral of happy cluckers pouring out all around the backyard.

Chicken owners are a smiling bunch. They often don “Wellies”, boots purposefully designed for handling animal droppings. They frequent the Higganum Feed Store and have lots of good stories involving coyotes. They are hands-on with nature.

Although we are a family with zero tolerance for pets (we are riddled with the sneezing gene), we do appreciate the valuable lessons that come from the care and feeding of livestock. While my own children have never scooped poop or seen their parents cry over a \$600 vet bill, they have formed close bonds with our neighbor’s animals. I often see them running around our yard trying to catch bunnies or put leashes on frogs. Sadly, I’ve even spied my youngest daughter trying to cuddle up with a salamander. For the sake of these children, something needs to be done here. So, I decided to learn a little bit more about raising our town bird. Perhaps this was a pet we could handle.

The good news starts at town hall: no permits or little licenses are required to hang around the necks of chickens. However, there are lots of folks who apparently have to come out and look at your coop. And a coop is pretty important when talking poultry. Those birds need a quality place for egg laying and raccoon dodging.

The other good news: they are pretty easy to manage. You toss some seeds (or table scraps) on the ground, check for eggs every morning, rake out the coop, and that’s about it. You can go crazy and set up heated water dishes for winter, but that’s fully optional. Oh, and some people recommend “chicken diapers” if you want to let your fluffy buddies come inside and watch TV. (Honestly, these are available online.)

My friends Tom and Sylvia Cushing are the ideal chicken owners. In fact, their Haddam home came complete with a genuine coop on the property. They practically felt obliged to set up a pen and buy some day-old chicks.

Now, a few years down the road, their brood exceeds 30 hens and they have one studly rooster. Each day, they are treated with the most gorgeous eggs— in the palest blues, browns and greens —for truly organic cooking and baking.

They have gotten to know the personalities of their chickens, and they understand nearly each of the thirty different sounds (clucks) that a chicken can make. And, they swear that watching chickens eat spaghetti is one of the funniest sights imaginable.

The other humorous sight is watching the chickens put themselves to bed. The sun goes down, things get dark, the chickens call it a day, and waddle on up into the coop.



It's as easy as that. Any human involvement in this process is completely discouraged. They should teach this at Lamaze classes.



While most people cannot say enough great things about raising chickens, some reality has to be injected on the downside. They require daily care.

Not every other day, like a cat, but every day. So, vacations need to include recruiting someone to do some feeding and sweeping.

And then there's this insight from my friend Kimberly, who grew up on a farm: "In the winter, their heads can freeze to the ground, and they squawk and pathetically flap their wings trying to get un-stuck. Do you really want your children waking up to that?"

With all this in mind, Haddam is rubbing off on me, and I have embraced the chicken fad. My family is slightly less enthusiastic. My husband thinks it is a little ambitious, since I've never had a pet and have killed off my share of houseplants; and my children would prefer something along the lines of a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

Of course, you really should include your immediate neighbors in the chicken equation, and mine are not too particularly gung ho. A few weeks back while chatting about my desire to join the "chicken-raiser trend" of Haddam, one neighbor declared with all seriousness, "If you get a rooster, I will call the police on you every single day of your life."

For some, the allure is clearly lost.

Just then, my daughter came by with a bucket.

"Six salamanders, Mom! And I've named them all!"

Well, perhaps I'll have to settle for raising Haddam's other unofficial favorite: the town lizard.

Kirstin Ahearn is a freelance copywriter who rode the wave of newbies into Higganum in 2007. She and her family truly appreciate how easy it has been to 'blend' into this wonderful community.