

And a Cluck, Cluck Here
From Duval Reads

Old MacDonald here again. This time I want to tell you about chickens. I have a few chickens on my farm, but some farmers have lots of chickens. Chickens are birds, but they do not really fly.

Like any bird, chickens have feathers, feet, beaks, and wings, but chickens cannot fly. They can flap their wings, and sometimes a chicken can get a few feet off the ground or even to the top of a shed roof. But chicken bodies are not suited for flying.

Some farmers let their chickens out in the yard to peck around for insects, seeds, and other food on the ground. As long as there is food to be found, chickens tend to stay close to home, so there is little need to worry about them running away.

Generally, chickens need help from the farmer to get all the food they need. The farmer feeds them special pellets, called chicken feed, or he can feed them dried corn, wheat, or oats.

At night—and all the time on some farms—chickens live in the chicken coop. A chicken coop is not a fancy shelter. It usually consists of a small building where the chickens make their nests and where they roost, or sleep, at night.

The chicken coop also has a fenced-in dirt yard. The main reason for having a fence is to keep other animals out. Chickens are tasty and—because they can't fly—they would be easy prey for other animals, including owls, foxes, raccoons, weasels, and skunks. These creatures are nocturnal predators, meaning they are animals that hunt at night, so every farmer needs to make sure that the chickens are all safely locked up in the coop every night before he or she goes to bed.

Female chickens are called hens. Hens lay eggs, which many people like to eat. On some farms, the farmer collects the eggs from the chickens' nests each morning and evening. On other farms the hens lay their eggs in cages with sloping bottoms so the eggs roll out onto a conveyor belt that collects them. The farmer and his family eat the eggs, or they sell them to other people.

Eggs have hard shells. If you crack the shell you can break open the egg and release the yolk and white. Egg yolk is yellow and egg white is actually clear, though it turns white when you cook it. Some people like to eat fried or scrambled or boiled eggs for breakfast. Eggs are also used to make other foods, including cakes, cookies, and other baked goods.

This hen laid several eggs, and now she is sitting on her eggs. If the farmer does not collect the eggs, the hen will keep sitting on them to keep them warm and protected. This is called nesting.

After the hen sits on the eggs for about twenty-one days, something amazing will happen. A chick will be born, and it will use its beak to crack open the shell from the inside! For twenty-one days, the chick has gradually grown inside the egg. All this time it has been using the egg yolk and white as its food. Within a few hours the chick will be fluffy and yellow. On some farms the eggs are hatched in incubators, machines that warm the eggs just like a mother hen.

Hens are good mothers. They naturally know to sit on eggs to keep them warm and how to raise baby chicks. They will even sit on other hens' (or even other birds') eggs! Unlike cows and pigs, chickens do not produce milk to feed their young. After the chicks hatch, they quickly learn to scratch and peck. Soon, these chicks will be ready to peck the ground to find food for themselves.

Male chickens are called roosters. The farmer usually only keeps one rooster in the chicken coop. Roosters do not lay eggs. Like the hens you saw earlier, this rooster has a red comb on top of his head. If you compare this rooster to the hens, you will also notice that he has a larger wattle. The wattle is a flap of bare skin that hangs down on a bird's throat. Roosters have larger wattles than hens.

Roosters, are famous for perching on fences and even on rooftops—if they can flap or scamper to the top of the barn— and crowing “cock-a-doodle-do!” Roosters are alarm clocks for farmers because they often crow as soon as the sun starts to rise. And getting up early is just fine for farmers, because they know that “the early bird gets the worm.” Roosters continue crowing from time to time throughout the day, but they usually do not go “cock-a-doodle-do” at night.

Of course, farmers don't raise chickens just for their eggs. Many people like to eat chicken. One of my favorites is fried chicken, but some folks like to eat roasted chicken or barbecued chicken.

A popular food many kids like to order when they go out to eat is called chicken fingers. Of course, chickens do not really have fingers! Chicken fingers are simply strips of cooked chicken meat that you eat with your fingers.

Well, that's about everything I can tell you about chickens, and mine are probably getting hungry right about now, so I better go throw a few scoops of feed into the coop.