

CHRISTMAS PRESSIE IDEAS for your favourite chicken enthusiast!

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# The cockerel conundrum

**Alan Holtham** debates a very real, 21st century problem that affects chicken breeders directly and most of the rest of society more generally; the disposal of surplus male chickens



Cockerels are an inevitable consequence of the hatching lottery, but if you're not able to keep them, what then?



If you've been tempted into breeding your own chickens then you'll already be aware of the problem. The laws of chance suggest that at least 50% of chicks hatched will be male and, while sometimes you might be lucky and get less, you can get more, too. I recently hatched a batch of six eggs, and every chick was a male!

Now, while there are few sights as appealing as a brooder full of young chicks, hatching chickens has its serious side. As a responsible keeper you must be prepared to deal with the inevitable and unwanted male birds produced and, for inexperienced keepers, that can be a problem that gets overlooked.

## Reality check

The reality, of course, is that anybody contemplating hatching chicks should be prepared to take full responsibility for all the consequences of what they're doing. In the real world, though, things don't work quite like that.

There must be so many unwanted cockerels around, judging by the number of 'Free to a good home'-type adverts I see in magazines, papers and on forums. Obviously, these owners are desperate to save their birds from an untimely end.

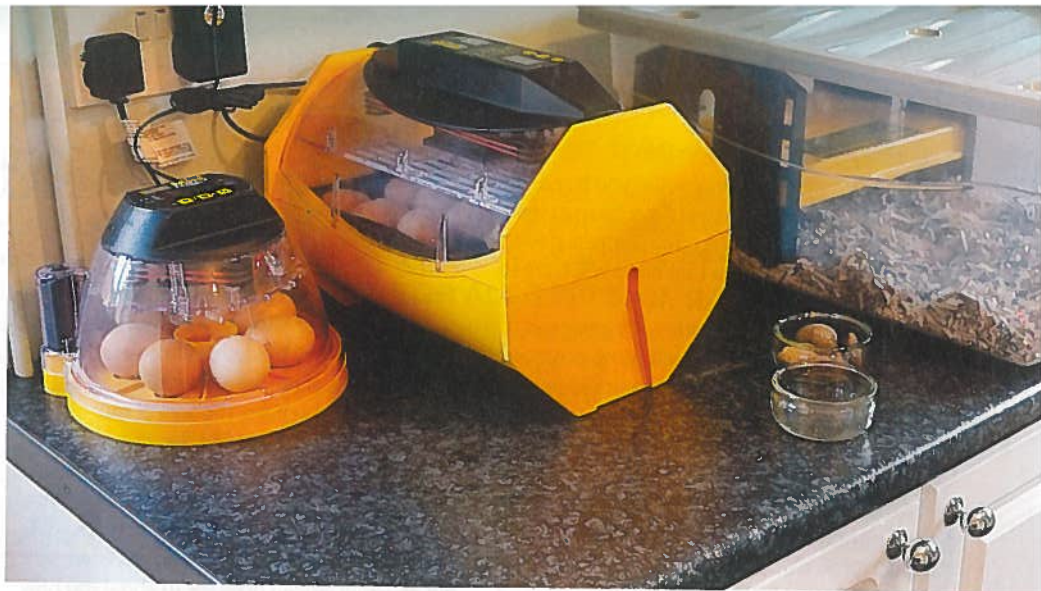
It's all too easy to get carried away with the fun and excitement of producing cute, fluffy chicks, forgetting that a good proportion of them will turn into noisy, bad-tempered nuisances that'll annoy the hell out of you and your neighbours!

But if you're determined to press ahead with your hatching plans, then what are the options for those inevitable male spares? Sadly, none of the possibilities are particularly auspicious, but the welfare of the birds should always be your number one priority.

I used to try to sell my unwanted cockerels at the local auction, rather naively thinking that this would get them to good homes. In practice, those that did sell they rarely topped 50p (less than the selling cost), and I now know that most of them went to the restaurant trade.

I've also heard disturbing suggestions that this route supplies birds for dog bait, ferret food or as 'practice birds' for Game fighting. Added to this is the prospect that, once sold, the sorry individuals will probably be caged up and passed around for days with little food and water, before finally being killed in a far less humane way than one would like.

Regrettably, nowadays, it's my impression that too many hobby breeders seem prepared to hand over surplus birds without caring about what's going to happen to them. As far



You may be equipped to hatch plenty of chicks, but are you prepared for dealing with the surplus male birds that are bound to be produced?

Too many hobby breeders seem prepared to hand over surplus birds without caring.

as I'm concerned, though, 'out of sight, out of mind' just isn't an acceptable maxim in this situation.

I've also learned that there's now a definite 'dumping season', which occurs in September and October, when large numbers of spring-hatched male chickens are simply abandoned into the wild to fend for themselves by irresponsible owners. Another increasingly popular option, as I know from personal experience, is to bag-up spare birds and simply lob them over the fence and into the garden of another keeper or breeder.

## Too stressful

You may be lucky and find a breeder who will take back any cockerels you hatch, but these are few and far between nowadays. Also, never forget the stress and trauma caused to the birds by being shipped around. So, the bottom line really is that responsible keepers should be prepared to do the culling themselves; you just have to harden your heart and get on with it.

I quite understand that many people find it difficult to kill an unwanted bird, and although I've now been culling them for several years and it does get easier with every one you do, I still feel pangs of guilt for taking another young bird's life.

But I justify this action to myself on grounds of welfare. All my birds are reared under ideal conditions, with diligent regard to the RSPCA-recognised five freedoms. They've already had more of a good life than 90% of commercial chickens, and they certainly haven't had the distressing trauma of industrial-scale production, transport and slaughter.

They've also never been exposed to the stressful rigours of an auction sale or

whatever unsavoury end may follow that.

When their time comes, I gather them up at night when they're quietly roosting; there is no fuss, no stress and I make sure that the end is swift and respectful.

The other important point is that you may also need to be able to dispatch a bird if it becomes ill or wounded, so it's an essential skill to learn. The earlier in their life you can do it the better, as you'll minimise the risk of getting attached to them. Also, older birds will eat quite voraciously, which is a waste of feed.

The difficulty, particularly for the inexperienced, is often that you can't tell the sex of the bird until it's several months old, and actually starts crowing. I always tend to err on the side of caution 'just in case', but my hunch is nearly always correct and, looking back, I could certainly have saved a lot of feed if I'd acted sooner.

The situation is different with auto-sexing breeds, of course, where (due to down colour or patterning) the sexual difference is obvious straight out of the shell. Personally though, I find it more bearable to dispatch older birds rather than young chicks; at least they've had a chance to realise some of their potential.

## Terrible losses

Of course, all this skirts around the moral issues. For those people who get indignant about hobby-scale hatching in the first place, I quietly point out the millions and millions of male birds killed as very young chicks in a commercial hatchery.

If you eat shop-bought eggs you're part of the culling process, whether you like it or not. Gone are the days of dual-purpose utility birds, where females were bred for egg laying and the males fattened up for the table. Today's modern, egg-laying hybrids are laying machines, and the male produced have no commercial value so are disposed of in staggering numbers as day-old chicks.

Obviously, these owners are desperate to save their birds from an untimely end.



## Health & welfare

What's more, for every pullet you buy as a point-of-lay bird, there will have been at least one cockerel to match so, somewhere down the chain, it's inevitable that birds will have to die as part of the process.

If you're not a particularly caring person, then breeding and culling will be no problem to you. But if, like me, you have some feelings for the sanctity of life and you are hatching eggs 'just for fun', then the morality may need some justification.

I know lots of people don't give it a thought, and I have to be careful not to appear hypocritical. But, at the moment, I've become reasonably comfortable culling males raised in my own hybrid breeding activities. My birds are bred as a sustainable food source, in the form of eggs. I need to hatch them for this reason, and cockerels are an unfortunate and unavoidable by-product.

I'm even more comfortable with the idea of selective breeding, and the associated culling that's done with a utility aim in mind (particularly when the male birds can go back into the food chain). I'm currently working on improving the egg size with my Light Sussex, and be able to eat any culled birds justifies their end to some extent.

However, I'm perhaps less comfortable with breeding and culling purely for show purposes. The reality is that breeders producing top quality show birds are very

selective, culling both male and female birds that don't make the grade.

### How to cull?

The crux of the matter, of course, is the actual culling, and here it would be as well to refer you to the official guidelines produced by the Humane Slaughter Association.

To optimise welfare, the aim of the slaughter method should be to render the bird immediately unconscious, without fear or pain, and then to quickly induce death before the recovery of consciousness. For this you need to be confident, quick and decisive, so get an experienced breeder to show you how to do it properly and responsibly before you start.

Our understanding of the physiological response of birds to stress has increased dramatically in recent years, and the legislation is continually changing to take account of this. However, unless you're working on a very small scale, in future it may become more difficult to cull birds without having to upgrade to more welfare-friendly (and expensive) practices.

Apparently, Defra is proposing to change the rules with regard even to private, domestic slaughter, as many traditional methods of killing are now regarded as unacceptable. Currently, killing your own birds, on your own premises, for private

consumption is free of any legislation or licensing requirements. Check out [www.gov.uk/farm-animal-welfare-at-slaughter](http://www.gov.uk/farm-animal-welfare-at-slaughter) for the latest guidance.

The various methods of killing are detailed in the HSA publication *Practical Slaughter of Poultry* which, although not a particularly pleasant read, does outline the current methods and legislation, depending on the size of your set-up and the intended use of the slaughtered birds.

But whatever method and equipment is chosen, the user should ensure they have the appropriate skills and training. Different rules apply in different situations, so my advice is to make sure that you're up to speed with both theory and practice, before attempting anything for real. 🐔

### The Humane Slaughter Association

The HSA is an independent, UK-based charity that promotes the humane treatment of all food animals. It constantly monitors the latest research and updates its guidelines to reflect current welfare standards, both for the animals and producers involved.

You can find out more by contacting the HSA at: The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathamstead, Herts. AL4 8AN, by telephone on 01582 831919, via email to: [info@hsa.org.uk](mailto:info@hsa.org.uk) or by visiting the website at: [www.hsa.org.uk](http://www.hsa.org.uk).

🐔🐔 For every pullet you buy as a point-of-lay bird, there will have been at least one cockerel to match.

It's all too easy to get drawn in to hatching chicks; they're just so cute and cuddly. Things can seem a bit different though, a few months on down the line.

