



From Darwin to the dinner table, the domesticated chicken has influenced human history in a number of surprising ways.

ORNITHOLOGY

Rulers of the roost

How an unassuming bird changed the world as we know it

By Greger Larson

Like Keyser Söze, the enigmatic criminal mastermind from *The Usual Suspects*, the temporal and geographic origins of the domesticated chicken are mysterious and unresolved. In addition, although we think we understand it, we perpetually underestimate the chicken's role in human culture and history. Luckily for us, Andrew Lawler's *Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?* wakes us from our ignorant dream, detailing one surprising fact after another that ultimately reveal a grand truth: that chickens are everywhere and are inextricably linked to the emergence and maintenance of human civilization.

Although there are four closely related wild jungle fowl species, domestic chickens descend primarily from just one: the red jungle fowl. The bird's propensity to hybridize is a theme that pervades every stage of the chicken's journey across the globe. Wild populations of red jungle fowl have been subjected to such pervasive admixture with domestic fowl that some have speculated that truly wild populations may no longer exist (1).

There are now more than 20 billion chickens on Earth—more than the combined total of cats, dogs, pigs, cows, and rats. There are at least three chickens for every individual human, but as their numbers grow, “they have paradoxically become less vis-

ible.” Lawler points to the recent escalation in demand for chicken meat as one possible explanation for this phenomenon.

According to Lawler, Americans now consume four times as much chicken as they did 60 years ago. To meet our growing appetite, breeders have selected for faster growth and more rapid rates of feed conversion. Birds are now harvested only 47 days after birth—23 days earlier than chickens reared in 1950 and 2.6 pounds heavier.

The commercial poultry industry has evolved such that the average consumer interacts only with the constituent parts of the bird, either as shrink-wrapped carcasses in supermarkets or as anatomically ambiguous meat at restaurants. This disconnect between chicken as animal and chicken as food has allowed commercial producers to meet our demand for cheap protein, through questionable husbandry practices that remain exempt from animal welfare legislation.

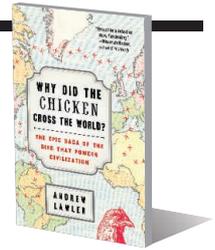
This “cowardly reckoning,” as Proust called it (2), on the part of the consumer has also led to a shift in the way the bird is generally perceived. Idolized and venerated since their domestication (if not before), the derogatory terms “birdbrain” and “chicken shit” only entered our lexicon in the mid-20th century, when commercial poultry production began to scale up.

Although it's clear that we hold little regard for their intellect, chickens have influenced numerous defining events in global human history. Perhaps, then, chickens are not best equated with Keyser Söze, but with Forrest Gump.

Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?
The Epic Saga of the Bird That Powers Civilization

Andrew Lawler

Atria Books, 2014. 335 pp.



For instance, although many people know that *On the Origin of Species* opens with a chapter about domestication, few realize that Darwin spent considerable time studying the morphology and impressive color variation in chicken breeds. Chickens also played a major role in initiating and sustaining the economic independence of both slaves and women in 19th-century America. (Because the bird held so little prestige among white male farmers, blacks and women were allowed to raise flocks and sell eggs and meat.) There was even a cock-fighting pit in Shakespeare's original Globe Theatre, and proceeds from cockfighting licenses and bird sales in the 19th-century Philippines generated more revenue than tobacco, the country's biggest export. In more recent history, chicken eggs have played a crucial role in the development and production of vaccines that prevent flu viruses from erupting into pandemics.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that chickens have thoroughly infiltrated our daily lives rests in their influence on our language and humor. People are cocky and hen-pecked, and we brood and crow. We walk on eggshells, hatch ideas, rule the roost, fly the coop, get our hackles up, consider our place in the pecking order, appear cockeyed, and run around like chickens with our heads cut off. We receive French hens on the third day of Christmas, ponder the motivation of chickens to cross the road, and wonder whether the chicken or the egg arrived first.

If we are assigning fictional characters, modern humans are Jon Snow and we know nothing (3). Despite our ignorance, the chicken has experienced a recent measure of success. The prestige of an animal can be correlated with the year its genome was sequenced, and the chicken has bragging rights over the dog, pig, cow, cat, and chimp.

Lawler's book goes a long way toward restoring chickens to their respected position within human history and our modern world. Both chickens and people will benefit as a result.

REFERENCES

1. A. T. Peterson, I. L. Brisbin, *Bird Conserv. Int.* **8**, 387 (1998).
2. M. Proust, *Swann's Way* (1913).
3. G. R. R. Martin, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Bantam Books, New York, 1996–2011).

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