chickens---our language is filled with references to their behavior. People are called “chickens” when afraid, “henpecked” when nagged, and our problems are said to “come home to roost.” But despite their prominence in our language, chickens have little going for them in the public eye.

Chickens don’t gaze at us soulfully or wriggle with joy; they express emotions more subtly, through a rich variety of calls and postures. To a casual observer, their movements can appear mechanical, even comical. Because of chickens’ apparent lack of similarity to companion animals, it can be hard to relate to the suffering of a laying hen crowded into a wire cage, unable to spread her wings. But if people knew more about the true nature of chickens, I think we would see a resounding public outcry over their mistreatment on factory farms. Their future depends on new public appreciation of the hen: she is not unlovable or emotionless, but a thinking, sensitive, and complex creature.

A chicken can recognize and remember about 100 other chickens. Chickens enjoy playing with toys, preferring balls with faces over plain balls. Some chickens like listening to classical music (Vivaldi, in particular) while others cud­dle up to red mittens for comfort. Knock­ing on the door before entering a small henhouse will keep hens from being startled by a visitor. These are but a few examples of the interesting nature of laying hens.

The chicken was brought to America by the Pilgrims. Descended from the red jungle fowl of Southeast Asia, the modern laying hen is very similar to her ancestors in general behavior. When allowed to roam freely, hens are extremely active during the day—walking, running, flying, exploring, and searching for food. At night they roost together, preferring to perch high off the ground. Their reputation as “chickens” may be due to their response to predators—running or flying away when disturbed, sometimes freezing or crouching.

Chickens are inquisitive animals and will closely investigate anything new in their environment. Hens like to work for their food. Even if food is readily available, hens choose to spend a large part of their day exploring for food and scratching and pecking at the ground.

Chickens are very social animals and form tight social groups. Groups of birds tend to dust-bathe (a grooming behavior) and eat to-to-
by chick begins communicating while still in the egg. They also have excellent vision and see a color range similar to that seen by humans.

Hens prefer to lay their eggs in a private nest and active laying hen than a battery cage.

The obvious answer is that showing us the reality of the hen’s life would decrease egg sales. Consumers are misled by idyllic barnyard scenes with hens brooding in straw-filled nests. Why isn’t the reality of the battery cage replaced in advertising or in children’s books?

The happy barnyard hen is not the only myth being perpetuated. America cherishes its farm animals. For humane farming and compassion.

We, the consumers, are the key. How we spend our money at the grocery store directly influences how foods are raised and how animals are treated. Every time you buy from a carton of eggs from battery-caged hens and to urge all egg consumers to switch to eggs from free-roaming hens.

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Our efforts to empower consumers to improve the lives of laying hens are part of a new HSUS nationwide campaign asking consumers to “shop with compassion.” Because the battery cage is one of the most inhumane systems for raising animals, it is the first target of our campaign.

We need your help to spread the word about battery-caged hens and to urge all egg users to switch to eggs from free-roaming hens.

Melanie Adcock, D.V.M., is HSUS director of Farm animals.

Refine your diet by purchasing eggs from uncaged birds.