

## WORCESTERSHIRE ANIMAL RESCUE SHELTER

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### Ex-Battery Hen Rescue Information

**All the information in this sheet has been kindly provided by the British Hen Welfare Trust.**

**For more information on their work please visit their website at [bwht.org.uk](http://bwht.org.uk)**

Thank you so much for your interest in rehoming some of our ex battery hens, the following pages (I realise it is long but please read to the end) will give you lots more information on Ex-Battery Hens and our adoption process, ensuring you are making an informed decision and you get the most enjoyment from your new family members. Should you have other hen care questions; there is also a wealth of information on housing and general care on [www.bhwt.org.uk](http://www.bhwt.org.uk) and other forums like [www.poultrykeeper.com](http://www.poultrykeeper.com)

We are a small team and our phones can get really busy some days so you may be asked to leave a message; if so please leave your name and number and give us chance to call you back.

**We must talk to you personally before we confirm a reservation**, it is charity policy that we speak to the person actually adopting the Girls so you cannot reserve hens on behalf of friends and family.

We look forward to hearing from you and thank you again for considering giving some of these little hens the chance of a free range future, you won't regret it!

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### How many?

The minimum number of hens we can usually reserve for you is three, the maximum normally twenty (which must all stay together with you).

If you are unsure on numbers, ask when you call and we will do our best to advise you dependent on the housing and space you have available, the time you are willing to give them and the number of eggs you can use..!

#### When can I get my hens?

If we don't have a date confirmed or the next rescue day in your area is fully booked when you call us, we can put you on the waiting list and email you when the next date is announced.

The Hens can get reserved many weeks before a rescue happens so please don't leave it until you have everything in place before you phone or you may be disappointed.

#### How much?

Our hens are £6 each. Your payment covers what we have to pay for the hens, vets fees for hens not well enough to go home, petrol, phone bills, equipment and feed. Any surplus goes towards our ongoing future costs.

#### Housing.

You can convert a regular shed or outbuilding, get plans from a book or the internet and build your own coop, or buy a purpose built hen house.

Design, prices, quality and sizes vary **hugely** so you will need to do some research. It is far better to pay more for a sturdy, well-built house that will last for years, than buy a small, cheap, thin-walled coop which will soon fall apart and have to be replaced.

You also need to decide on your preferred system; either keeping the girls in a smaller house and attached run and frequently moving it onto a fresh area of lawn or ground; or building a larger permanently sited aviary type enclosure.

**The most crucial thing is that your housing/run is fox proof. Hungry foxes are of course attracted by hens; they will visit night and day and will get in and kill ALL your birds if they are not secure. We therefore do not advise that you let your birds free range (even in suburban gardens) when you are not around to keep an eye on them. Please do not underestimate the fox.... they can jump/climb like cats, so a standard 6 or 7ft perimeter garden fence alone will not keep them out. The fox may come at any time during the day or night and no, they aren't scared of your dog. You simply cannot be too careful.**

### Where can I get the equipment I need?

There are numerous websites that supply a good range of books, feed, supplements, equipment and chickeny gifts, a local supplier is [www.newlandgrange.com](http://www.newlandgrange.com) or the BHWT online shop which helps support the charity <http://www.bhwt.org.uk/shop/index.php>

### The Hens

The hens are normally Lohman Browns, Goldline, HyLines or Isas (all Rhode Island Red crosses) and about 17 months old when we buy them from farms. They are off to slaughter as they are deemed not commercially viable (i.e. they may be laying 3 or 4 eggs every 5 days, rather than the desired optimum of an egg every day.) As well as hens from small, barren, battery cages, we also bring out hens from colony or enriched cages (bigger indoor cages with 30-60 hens in) and hens that have been kept in deep litter or barn systems (flocks of several thousand birds, all kept inside.)

### General Health

We never knowingly pass on a poorly hen and any that concern us are kept in our "intensive" care units and when well enough can be rehomed if you have the experience/patience and facilities to rehabilitate them. Should you have an indoor area such as a secure part of a barn, stable or outbuilding where a few hens can be kept quiet, warm and well fed for a few weeks, do mention this when you call or when you arrive on collection day. (Even broken limbs do mend themselves, it just takes time and rest.)

On rescue day the bird's combs (the pink bit on the top of their heads) will be large, pale and flaccid as they dissipate heat through it and the battery cages and sheds are constantly hot. The combs will shrink and the red colour will return once they have access to the great outdoors and live with you.

All the commercial farmers we work with vaccinate, worm and salmonella test their birds as their eggs form part of the human food chain. As they (and the generations of hens before them) have been hatched, reared and kept inside, they are also highly unlikely to have ever been exposed to external disease threats, few parasites and are very unlikely to suffer from genetic/inherited problems. (So while they may look tatty, they are usually basically sound.)

Please note: from our experience of rescue, we know that we may sadly lose 1% of the Hens simply due to stress/underlying conditions. Out of 500 hens, we may hear of 3- 5 birds that haven't made it through the following week. This is why our minimum reservation is 3; should you be unlucky enough to have a hen that dies and you only adopted a pair, you would have been left with a solitary and rather unhappy Girl (and we can't normally provide you with another hen to complete the flock for five weeks or so, which isn't great).

### Limping

Due to the lack of exercise leading to weak leg muscles and the way the hens are brought out of their cages by farm staff (carried upside down by the legs, sometimes just one leg) it is not uncommon for some of the Girls to suffer from soreness and bruising of the legs for a few days after the rescue.

Arnica cream can help with the bruising. Some will limp and we often have one or two out of the farm who will be off their legs for a week or more. In our experience, they will make a full recovery. Should you experience this hopping/lameness when you get your Girls back home, don't panic and do feel free to give us a call so we can advise you on the best way to accommodate your hen while she gets better.

### **Stress/underlying conditions.**

Sadly as the Girls have been pushed to their very limit in the first year of life and the changes in conditions upon rehoming are so great, some (about one in one hundred) simply cannot cope and despite all of your efforts and kindness just give up and die within days. Others (perhaps one in two hundred) may have weak hearts, liver problems or other non-obvious underlying conditions which means they too will not have long retirements. Given the small numbers involved, the probability is that your hens will be fine but you must remember that if the worst does happen, whilst it is extremely upsetting, it is not your fault and there was nothing more you could have done. Even a single second of your kindness or a minute in the sun is more than they would have had if it was some other transport crate they were loaded into.

### **What happens if I have problems with my hens or can no longer keep them?**

We are always on the end of the phone for advice, no matter how long you have had your hens. If you no longer feel able to look after your WARS Girls, for whatever reason, please don't hesitate to call us on 01905 831651 or email [info@wars.org.uk](mailto:info@wars.org.uk). We will always endeavour to take back the birds and find a new home for them - whatever the problem.

### **Eggs**

Most Ex-Bats will carry on laying for years to come and while their brown eggs will increase in size, over time they will decrease in number. (The charity cannot however guarantee the future laying capability of any individual hen.) Be aware your new Girls are not used to finding and using a nest box and at first may lay their eggs wherever they happen to be.

After the rescue, the hens' laying routine will be disturbed by the total change in surroundings and diet and it's not unusual for them to stop laying eggs for a few days or even weeks while they adjust. Egg shell quality too decreases as hens age and soft shelled/wobbly eggs may be seen in the years to come (don't worry, the contents are fine).

### **Other Hens and Cocks**

The Battery Girls will need to be kept separate for at least a week/ten days or so from your existing hens if you have any. Some ex-bats can be a little fragile, have little self-confidence and be easily bullied when they first come out of the farm, others are very spirited and bold and think they rule the roost from day one! For these reasons keep the new hens apart but within sight and sound of your others at first. This will make final integration easier when it does happen though there will always be some squabbling as a new pecking order is established.

You may find the initial settling in period of your Girls a bit distressing, as hens can be surprisingly nasty to each other. Your hens will almost certainly be from different cages and therefore will not know each other and so there will always be a short period where the hierarchy of the group is established and this can involve pecking, chasing, squawking, bullying and guarding of the food and water sources.

If you have problems when you get your hens home, there are a few things you could try. Smearing Vaseline on the combs of the victim hens helps, (the bullies will not be able to get a grip.) Hang up distractions for the birds: shiny CDs, half cabbages or corn on the cobs, just above head height. That will give the hens something else to do, taking the focus away from the "under hen". Giving them enough space so that the lowest ranking hen can escape and stay out of trouble is helpful. Also putting two sources of food and water in the pen will ensure all the Girls can eat and drink, it won't take them long to realise that there is enough to go round and they no longer have to fight for food.

If you have one hen in particular doing the bullying and things really are getting nasty, you could try separating her from the group for a while (but keeping her in sight of the others). Never remove the hen who is getting picked on as you'll have to start all over again when she is reintroduced as a "stranger". The pecking order will settle over a week or two.

Likewise they will need keeping apart from any cockerels you may have for at least a month. The girls can easily be damaged, even killed by their advances and claws/spurs, as they have weak legs and their backs when rescued are often poorly feathered.

### **Other Pets.**

These hens have no fear and will get along happily with cats, dogs, and livestock. If your existing pets are friendly, controllable and the introduction is supervised and carefully managed, there shouldn't be any problems.

### **Initial Appearance.**

You can normally choose either the better feathered birds or (depending on the farm) the real scraggies. The hens often have few feathers because they have been worn off on the wires of their cages, pecked off by their cage-mates or not been renewed as they have been putting their energy into producing eggs. (Most people are surprised that the majority of birds don't look too bad.) If you do take a few balder hens, you'll be amazed at how quickly they blossom, they will start to re-feather within a few weeks and look amazing within a couple of months!

### **Temperament and Suitability as Pets.**

These hybrid hens are bred for docility and you will find they are gentle, inquisitive and friendly, eating out of your hand and following you around the garden (and into the house if you let them!) pecking at your shoe laces in a few days.

### **Weather and your hens**

Chickens should keep each other warm at night through body heat in a suitable sized coop. However, you must try to avoid the hens getting cold and wet. When they are first homed, they will not know to shelter when they need to and may stand outside when it's raining and windy, so initially you may have to physically put and shut the hens in your coop if the weather is bad.

If you are rehoming during the summer months and you have hens with bald backs/heads, it may be worth putting sunblock on their skin on particularly sunny days. You can buy sunblock suitable for pets.

### **Rescue Day**

We are not a sanctuary and do not normally keep hens here. We collect the Girls from the BHWT in Coventry on the morning of rescue day, put them in transport crates and bring them back for examination, a health check and nail clip. Our new owners normally arrive to collect their reserved Girls later in the day. This way all of the stress for the hens is confined to one day and they will go from cage to their new retirement homes (and getting used to your way of doing things) in a matter of hours. There can be up to fifty adopters arriving to pick up their hens on rescue day, so please do be patient if there is a short queue of cars and wait in your vehicle.

### **Transporting your hens home**

We want your Girls to travel home in comfort and safety (it's been a long day for them!) Please bring either straw/newspaper lined cat carriers or dog crates or similar sized sturdy cardboard boxes (with horizontal ventilation slits around 1x6 inches cut into the sides - small stab holes are not sufficient)

For comparison, a hen is about the size of a football and it is better to put two or three in a bigger box, (a single hen may fret on her own).

We do not allow hens to be driven home in enclosed saloon car boots (unless you're not travelling far and your boot is fully air conditioned)

### **First day of freedom**

When you get your girls back home we would advise that you keep them locked in their coop with food and water for the first 24 hours, so they get accustomed to where "home" is. The actual rescue is very stressful for the birds and they will need to be kept dark and quiet the day you get them home (as tempting as it is to look at them!). In our experience, stress is the most common factor in the 1% of hens that don't make it.

When they are first let out you may need to teach/herd them to go in as darkness falls (or if it rains) and tempt them out again in the morning. As they have been in artificial light for 18 hours a day, it takes them a couple of days to get the hang of things! They may well also need to be taught how to perch, often preferring to sleep on the floor or in the nest boxes, which is to be discouraged (it leads to dirty eggs). We advise to let them sleep where they choose for the first week or so, some birds may simply not have the strength to perch and jumping down may well lead to broken legs. When they are strong enough, go in to the coop after dark, scoop them off the floor and put them on low perches (perhaps knee height). After a couple of nights of this, they should learn to roost themselves.

### **Feeding**

The BHWT strongly advise feeding the Smallholder Ex Bat Range; they have trialled this feed and found it provides the best possible nutrition for the Girls. Newly released hens should be fed on the Ex-Bat Crumb and you can keep them on this permanently or start slowly introducing Ex-Bat Pellets, whichever your hens prefer. The Ex-Bat Crumbs and Pellets can be fed to all poultry, but have been specifically formulated to support egg production and encourage feather regrowth in hard working, commercial laying hens.

Battery hens will have been fed only a powdery, dry mash all the time they have been in the cages, so should not be put straight onto pellets; They may not recognise pellets as food and have no grit in their crops to grind them or whole corn down at first, therefore managing the slow changeover from crumbs to pellets is very important.

If you have any questions on feeding or just want to locate your nearest stockists of the E- Bat feed, please call the **Careline on 01362 822904**

For the first few weeks in order to help the hens settle, you may want to place a couple of feed and water points in the run, so any low ranking hens can easily drink and eat.

It is fine to feed treats or a small amount of mixed corn in the afternoon, this will make them friendlier and guarantee they go to sleep with a full crop. (Do not overfeed your hens or scatter lots of food or veg on the floor though as this will just go off and may even attract mice and rats.

### **Crop?**

Hens have no teeth and so food is held in a pouch on their neck/chest called a crop, where it is ground up before passing to their stomach. As some ex-Bats have very few feathers, the crop is very visible, especially late in the day when it is full of food and swollen. This may look like a "lump" or "growth" and has in the past alarmed first time chicken keepers, please be assured it is entirely normal and will have shrunk by the morning.