



RAISING CHICKENS WITH ALTITUDE

Wyoming locales – including those up high – are suitable for poultry production

By Hudson Hill

When Wyoming residents talk about livestock, our first thoughts are not of chickens.

However, having chickens is a great way to be involved in livestock production on a small scale.

While egg and meat production are major reasons why people own chickens, there are many others. Some include companionship, insect control, soil tillage, or just being involved with something that brings us closer to the cycle of life.

Numerous Breeds Out There

Landowners should know there are hundreds of different breeds of chickens. We will separate all breeds into three major categories: layers, dual purpose, and meat birds.

There are also different types of birds in those breeds – standard-size birds (which most people are familiar with) and Bantams (Banties), which are smaller birds of the same breed (basically miniature versions).

I'll mention my favorite breeds and types while discussing the different categories of birds. Readers should realize they might not like my favorite birds anymore than they might like my favorite

sandwich (Rueben).

I would encourage using the following to help decide what breed of chicken will be best for you.

- Egg production (how many eggs per day).
- Shell color – if selling eggs, brown shell producers may be preferred.
- Cost and availability of the birds.
- Breed climate hardiness.
- Personality type – different breeds of birds have different personalities. If looking for birds that will make great pets for kids, try the cochins or Silkie varieties.
- Foraging ability (some chickens will travel farther from home than others).
- Ability to control insects (there are varieties that naturally hunt more than others).

Breed Characteristics

Layers – These are bred and developed to do one thing: produce the most eggs for the least amount of feed. The Leghorn is a great example. The Leghorn is a small bird that makes large eggs and lots of them. The Leghorn hen has the ability to lay one and half times her own body weight in egg shell in one laying cycle or about 18 months. My personnel favorite brown egg layers are the sex link

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I also remind people that a chicken is just a tiny little T-Rex that is ready to start chasing grasshoppers.

varieties and the Rhode Island Reds. The sex link birds are called this because, when hatched, the male chicks have a different color pattern than the female chicks making them much easier to sort at the hatchery.

Dual-purpose birds – These birds seem to work well for most situations in Wyoming. These chickens are called dual purpose because they will lay eggs but also work for meat production. Many people order dual-purpose breeds and keep the hens for laying and use the roosters to stock their freezers. The heavier-bodied birds certainly tend to have an advantage in Wyoming's colder winters. Three of my favorites are the Buff Orpington, Black Astralops, and the Barred Rocks. The Jersey Giant is a breed that I have never owned but seems to work well for many backyard situations.

Meat birds – There is a specific type of chicken that does one thing and one thing only – produce meat. Hatchery catalogs usually refer to meat birds as the Cornish Cross. Landowners looking to raise birds specifically to fill the freezer should consider these. The meat birds will give the most amount of meat for the least amount of feed. The Cornish Cross birds are designed to grow rapidly and, under the right conditions, can produce 1 pound of meat for every 3.1 pounds of feed consumed. These birds will never be egg-laying birds and will be harvested somewhere between 6-12 weeks of age.

Hudson Hill counts his chickens before they hatch – and is usually right. A University of Wyoming Extension educator serving southwest Wyoming, he can be reached at (307) 885-3132 in Afton or at (307) 828-4091 in Kemmerer, or at hrhill@uwyo.edu.

Care Should Match Needs

Successfully raising meat birds comes from understanding that these birds have very fast metabolisms that allow them to grow very quickly. Successful producers make sure the nutritional needs of Cornish Cross birds are met. Many have found these birds will grow so fast they can sometimes develop leg problems. Understanding the birds' needs and providing the right amount of feed at the right times is essential.

Many hatchery catalogs caution about raising the White Cornish Cross birds above 5,000 feet, indicating that heart and leg problems may develop. In western Wyoming, we have been raising birds at 6,800 feet and have had few problems. However, if a producer wants to be cautious, there is a slower-growing Red Cornish Cross bird sometimes called the Red Ranger – also a quality bird and does not seem to have issues due to high altitudes.

Once these birds get through the "chick" stage, they are very hardy. If chickens have plenty of feed and water, and the ability to stay dry and out of the wind, then cold and high altitude have little effect on most chickens.

For most landowners, having chickens brings pleasure and fulfillment in ways only raising animals and producing one's own food can. To have the best experience with poultry, choosing the right bird for your interests and abilities will help ensure a positive outcome from this backyard endeavor.

The ruination of any chicken enterprise

One thing can ruin any poultry project – predators!

Whether a wild predator or the neighbors' pets, an animal killing chickens takes a toll on the money, time, and emotion we have tied-up in a poultry project. Since few Wyoming locations are without predators, landowners should consider how to protect their chickens. Having a predator-secure coop close to the house is a great option for many; however, additional protection is often needed.

One product many poultryists use is an electric net fence. The fence comes in several heights and is normally 140 to 165 feet long. I love using this fence where I live. Not only does it keep the chickens in, everything else (except for raptors) is kept out. This type of fence is easily moved and can fit almost any shaped area. There is an upfront cost associated with the fence, which needs an electric fence charger. However, for most landowners, the fence could be considered as an investment – since the question isn't if predators will use unprotected chickens as their next meal, it is when.

