

The Life of a Free Range Upcountry Rooster
By Gregory Peck

You might think that being a free range upcountry rooster is easy. Think again. I am up at the crack of dawn, cock-a-doodle-doing 'til I'm hoarse, trying to wake up the keeper. By the time she's up, I've gathered up my hens inside the barn so that when she opens the door, we can rush out like the barn's on fire. The keeper keeps food and water in the barn for me, but it's not nearly as good as what I find for my flock in the garden. I spend most of the day searching for bugs, seeds, and tender greens to treat my hens. If I am really lucky, I'll find the gals some juicy worms in the compost. When we're full, we scratch a big hole in the dirt for a communal dust bath, and then we stretch out in the sun for a siesta.



After our nap, if I'm feeling daring, I lead my hens on a raid into the vegetable garden. Not only is the soil softer and easier to dig, but the plants are so tender and tasty. If the keeper sees us, she comes running out of the house flapping her arms and screeching like a crazed hawk. To make her happy, we act scared, running and flapping in all directions.

I keep an "eagle eye" towards the sky all day long watching for hawks. At the first glimpse of one soaring overhead, I yell to my hens, "Run. Run to the barn"! The keeper probably thinks I'm a coward because I'm always the first one into the barn, but she doesn't understand that, I'm leading the way. This tactic works well for most hawks and I only occasionally lose a hen to one of them. But not with the Goshawks! They are so bold that they chase me and my gals right into the barn and sadly, not all of my hens can find hiding places.

At dusk I bring the girls back inside the barn, so that the keeper can lock the door, keeping out all the creatures of the night that are looking for a chicken dinner. Only then can I rest.

Spring is my favorite time of year, when love is in the air, and the hens have baby chicks on their minds. The hens gather their buff, brown, and green eggs together and keep them warm with their bodies. Magically, after twenty-one days, baby chicks appear. My job really gets hard when I have to keep track of all those little balls of fluff!

My keeper, Amador County Master Gardener Janice Johnson, is giving a free class on living in the forest on Saturday, February 2nd and another free class on backyard chickens March 9th. Both classes are from 9:00 AM to Noon at the Cooperative Extension office 12200-B Airport Rd, Jackson. If you have questions, email her at pinetown@volcano.net.