

# Caribbean Chickens

Maligned Mistreated  
Misunderstood



By Roy DuVerger

## Arrival

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Wild chickens are a way of life here in the Caribbean, they are part of the natural heritage of the region, and a point of contention.

During our travels, our first encounter with neighborhood chickens was in Key West, Capital of the Conch Republic whose official bird is the Rooster. There they run wild, their numbers are small, and they really don't make enough noise to wake you in the morning. At least not where we stayed.

We really hardly noticed them, although I'm sure many who live there full time may have had a different opinion.

Later on we moved to Hawaii and immediately encountered wild chickens, especially the crowing kind. There in Hawaii, however, it was a different story. The chicken population was both widespread and vocal.

Chickens have a small home range and can't fly or swim well. Their distribution throughout the world, then, is directly related to humans' interest in the creatures and they appear to have all descended from the red junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*).

A 2012 article published in PLoS One by Australian anthropologist Alice Storey and her colleagues used mitochondrial DNA to figure out where chickens came from and how they made their way around the world.

According to Storey and colleagues, the domestic chicken came to the Americas by multiple routes. One of those routes was from Europe, when Dutch and Portuguese slave traders brought chickens over from Africa in the 16th century. The researchers' DNA investigation of archaeological chicken bones from eastern New World sites in Haiti and Florida, for example, suggests that the introduction of chickens in this area of North America came in the 1500s and 1600s, and that these animals share genetic

similarities with chickens from archaeological sites in Spain dating to the same period.

The oldest route for importation of chickens to the Americas appears to be through Polynesia prior to Columbus. At the archaeological site of El Arenal in coastal Chile, excavators found 50 chicken bones that represented at least five different chickens. As Storey and colleagues report in another article in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the site has been confidently dated to 700-1390 AD, meaning these bones are the earliest evidence of chickens in the Americas, having arrived at least a century before Columbus. Radiocarbon dates, isotope information and mitochondrial DNA all agree with the archaeological evidence of a pre-Columbian introduction of the domesticated chicken to South America.

## Agriculture

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At Black Pearl Ecological they cleaned out the vines and other non-essential vegetation and laid out their plots and fruit tree locations. Spreading a little chicken feed around the area brought in the chickens to begin their contribution to the cleaning process. Within a couple of weeks the areas they had upgraded to begin planting had been completely aerated and cleaned.

Once the plants went in and mulch was applied, they found it was no problem in keeping the chickens in the various plots as they love going through the mulch on a regular basis keeping the plots well aerated while supplying natural fertilization.

Another advantage is the contention between wild chickens and iguanas. The harassment of the iguanas by the wild chickens has helped keep them out of the area. The iguanas seem perfectly happy using the Orange Guavaberry and Pigeonberry trees on their property, while avoiding

the areas frequented by the wild chickens, thus minimizing agricultural damage without having to use extreme measures.

Then there are the eggs that they collect from nesting boxes. According to Mother Earth News, free range eggs have 1/3 less cholesterol and 1/4 less saturated fat than store bought eggs. They also have 3 times more vitamin E and 7 times more beta carotene.

## Hurricane Observations

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September 6, 2017. Category 5 Hurricane Irma is bearing down on St Thomas Island in the US Virgin Islands.

The morning after the hurricane virtually destroyed the island, I walked outside still in disbelief about the aftermath. There was literally nothing green left, not even a leaf on what trees were left standing.

Slowly I walked around the fallen trees that lay in the driveway, heading down to the first floor of the house to get the bird feeders and get the food out for those that survived. As I set foot on the lower driveway which leads to the first floor stairs, I was greeted by a shocking sight: wild chickens greeting me in the same manner they have for months. I started looking to see who was there, counting how many. I got their food out and walked to the east end of the deck where I could throw the food out on the ground for them to eat.

I spread the food out across a large area so they could all eat without contention. I could not believe that not only did the flock survive, but I had two new chickens that I had never seen before among them. These two new chickens just stood in awe watching as those around them filled their stomachs. As if they could not believe that there were people who would treat them kindly and help them survive.

As I stood watching the flock eat, I could hear a rustling in the fallen trees along the chickens' preferred route to our property. I stood in amazement and watched as not only the mother hen emerged, but all 11 of her three-week-old chicks were right behind her along with a protective rooster.

The fact that these chickens could survive a storm of this magnitude was astonishing and gave me hope that more species had managed to survive with minimal loss of life.

## Raptors

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Our island is also home to three raptor species, two of which live on our side of the island: the Red-Tailed Hawk and the American Kestrel. The Red-Tailed Hawk has picked up the nickname "chicken hawk" because when the Europeans introduced domestic fowl to the American mainland it developed a taste for picking one off now and then. However, here on our island the story is a little different.

What we witnessed after Hurricane Irma was the routine assault by the Red-Tailed Hawks on the chickens. They were the Red-Tails' prime food source after the hurricane had killed nearly everything else. It was the same for the American Kestrel as most of its food sources had not survived the hurricane; young chicks became their prime target.

Now if the islanders had followed the non-native thinking and decimated the chicken population, what would have been the raptors' fate? Would they have stayed in hopes of finding food and starved to death, or would they have left hoping to find food somewhere else among the hurricane ravaged islands and in the end met the same unhappy fate?

Here in St. Thomas the raptors have evolved so that these non-native chickens, both young and old, are one of their primary foods. Subsequent to

this catastrophic event they turned out to be their primary food source while the environment healed itself.

## Rats

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During the early morning hours a ruckus erupted out near one of the chicken nests: five chickens had encircled a rat that got caught out in the open. As I watched, the chickens made several attempts to claw the rat but there was just enough wiggle room for the rat to evade them and to finally escape. I had never seen or heard of this behavior before, but obviously the chickens saw the rats as a mortal enemy.

Then several months later a group of six chickens had surrounded a rat in the middle of the driveway. This time there was no place to hide and too many claws and beaks to avoid. In a matter of minutes they were making sure the rat was dead before moving off to continue feeding.

I still wasn't sure if this was a regular battle or just a chance meeting between the two species, until this year when a battle took place in our banana plot. Again there was to be no escape for the rat that had dared enter their territory.

In a place where these rats try to get into your homes, chew on electrical cables and are a known carrier of disease, among other things, I found another reason why having wild chickens around the yard pays dividends.

## Health

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Post-storm, the clean smelling air started to turn sour as the smell from rotting flesh of dead animals and the decaying fruit and leaves started to grow. The decomposition also provided the perfect opportunity for a cockroach explosion. The last thing we needed was our house being invaded by these disease carrying creatures.

According to the World Health Organization cockroaches are proven or suspected carriers of the organisms causing: diarrhea, dysentery, cholera, leprosy, plague, typhoid fever and viral diseases such as poliomyelitis.

In addition they carry the eggs of parasitic worms and may cause allergic reactions, including dermatitis, itching, swelling of the eyelids and more serious respiratory conditions.

Here on St. Thomas cockroaches have two native enemies, scorpions and lizards. We have no idea how the scorpion population managed the storm, but we saw very few lizards and most of the geckoes are simply not big enough to handle them.

Enter the chickens.

Cockroaches are really high in protein and very nutritious, at least to a chicken. Once they consumed their basic grains for the morning, rummaging through the green matter covering the yard was their next priority.

As the days passed by the cockroach explosion never happened on our property. In fact as time passed the number of cockroaches seen while working in the yard continued to fall as the chickens worked their magic.

While we never minded that wild chickens lived in the woods surrounding our property, the value they had post hurricane changed our view of them.

They provided food to two native raptor species, maintained a healthy environment and their eggs provided us a fresh food source when little else was available.

## Daily Life

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At our home on the northside of St Thomas, Redtail Hawks would circle our yard and surrounding open areas, plunging down toward earth to grab

an unaware chicken. American Kestrels roosted nearby and hunted the young chicks to feed their own hatchlings.

The area has become a “killing zone” as nature has intended through 500 years of Natural Ecological Evolution.

Now where would these raptors be today if we had followed the path of those that call for their removal from the territory?

A glimpse of that outcome is apparent today. In mid-2018, less than a year after the hurricanes passed through, a local effort resulted in the killing of numerous free range chickens tended by established agricultural businesses. This was both illegal and detrimental to the food chain that these raptors had evolved into using for their very survival.

Today the Redtail Hawk barely ever floats overhead looking for food. Where we would watch three at a time circle above, today we are lucky to see one just pass by.

With no more chicks around, the American Kestrel is rarely seen, and when it does stop by it's trying to catch a Grassquit from beneath our bird feeder. Come nesting time I wonder what the available food sources will be for their young, and if they even have a chance to survive. For according to Cornell University, the American Kestrel has been known to deliver up to 40 prey items per day to nests with five young!

## In Closing

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I strongly feel that like with many aspects of our environment, post catastrophic event research needs to be an integral part of every species' CV.

With climate change and the effects it is having, as ecosystems evolve to meet the new heat index challenges and changing rainfall amounts, we currently have no knowledge of what part wild chickens are going to play in our future.



Wild chickens are the only species we have on some of the islands that create the disturbed soil which some seeds require in order to germinate. We must not jump to conclusions that result in our removal of a species that our ecosystem and its inhabitants will need to evolve successfully.

If you would like to know more about our findings, watch for my new book coming out in late-2025, "Exotics, Have We Gone Over the Edge of the Cliff? "©

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