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Switzerland's latest pet craze sees demand for chickens soar

The evolution of chickens from farm animal to pet is gaining momentum. Tens of thousands of private gardens now have chicken coops. This has prompted a response from the Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office.

DENISE LACHAT

Switzerland's most popular pet is – the fish. Not the cat, as most people tend to assume; in terms of numbers, the fish takes top spot, as the animal welfare organisation Schweizer Tier-schutz (STS) is well aware. The exact number of fish swimming around the country's private aquariums is unknown. But it must be quite high. After all the cat, Switzerland's number two pet, will soon number two million. The dog comes in at number three on half a million.

Need for nature

However, another animal is gaining ground in the popularity stakes. And

it isn't the usual cuddly furball either (although nor is the fish, to be fair). Enter the chicken. That's right – the Swiss now like to keep chickens: an estimated 70,000 private households have chickens as pets and their popularity is growing. "More and more people want chickens. That may well have something to do with the Covid pandemic," says Sarah Camenisch, spokesperson of the Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO). No-one knows exactly why chickens are in such high demand; however, Camenisch suspects it has something to do with a growing yearning for nature. General Covid surveys tell us that the Swiss felt increasingly drawn to nature during the pandemic. Shops,



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restaurants, schools, gyms and ski areas were all closed. So, people suddenly had time for walks in nature, baking bread and buying fresh vegetables straight from the farm instead. Many people also acquired dogs and cats during the pandemic to combat the loneliness of working and studying from home.

Another factor behind the chicken's evolution from farm to domestic animal, writes Samuel Furrer, zoologist and head of the STS wild animals department, is that consumers increasingly want to know the origin of their food and how it is produced. What better way to know than keeping your own animal? "Some people slaughter and eat their chickens,"

says Furrer. However, in most cases people make do with the eggs. Especially those who name their feathered friends and like to hold them affectionately; after all, chickens can be cute. Think, for example, of the Pekin Bantam.

Yes to animal welfare, no to animal diseases

However, chickens shouldn't be held to the chest or carried around. "They tend not to like that," says Sarah Camenisch, stressing that chickens are more for watching than for petting. There are also other things people should know about when keeping chickens, so the FSVO in conjunction with the STS launched a nationwide campaign in spring 2023 with two objectives: to uphold animal welfare and to prevent the spread of animal diseases. The first thing to consider

"The key is to look after the animals' interests – it's the same whether you keep blue whales, honeybees or chickens."

Bernd Schildger, former zoo director in Berne

is whether you have enough space. Ideally, three chickens should have 50 square metres of green area for scratching, pecking and dustbathing. They are also social animals and must not be kept in isolation. So, you need at least two or ideally three. The lockable coop should be at least two square metres for three chickens.

You also need a closed aviary as protection against foxes and martens, and as an alternative to the coop, so the animals don't have to be kept locked up in the coop if there is an outbreak of disease such as bird flu. This infrastructure does not come cheap, as Samuel Furrer from STS points out. Three chickens – depending on the owner's DIY skills – can cost 1,500 to 4,000 Swiss francs, with annual feeding costs of about 400 francs on top of that. Chickens are not to be fed kitchen leftovers, but should be given pellets or corn middlings. As with any pet, chickens also need to visit the vet occasionally. According to the Swiss Veterinary Society, there are veterinary clinics that specialise in treating domestic animals like birds or rabbits. Chickens are to them what dogs and cats are to a standard veterinary practice. The vet can treat respiratory infec-

The government is taking an interest in domestic chickens: people who keep chickens at home must register them with the veterinary authorities as a protective measure against the spread of disease. Photo: Keystone

The chicken is not a cuddly creature. But they are comfortable around people. Photo: Keystone

tions, injuries or illnesses affecting their ability to lay eggs, worms, fleas, mites and other parasites. In a nutshell: think it through before buying chickens. They must be registered with the relevant cantonal offices so immediate remedial measures can be taken in the event of diseases such as bird flu or Newcastle disease. Chickens may have to stay cooped up to prevent the spread of disease.

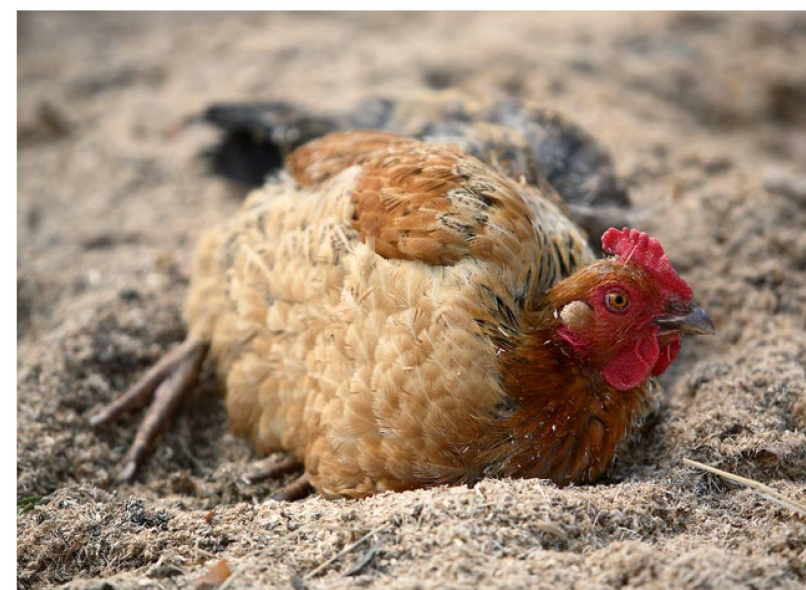


Adopt a chicken

The chicken as a domestic pet still pales into insignificance next to its farmyard counterparts, of which there were more than 13 million in Switzerland in 2022; about four per cent more than in the previous year. At the same time, a growing number of 'retired' laying hens can be found pecking and scratching around people's gardens, having been adopted. Laying hens for fattening are of no commercial use during the four to six weeks spent moulting, as they do not lay eggs during that time. This leads to them being culled after about a year, whereas their normal lifespan can easily last four to six years. After moulting, hens return to laying an egg a day, as Samuel Furrer stresses. He approves of such initiatives as "Adopte une cocotte" (a chicken adoption programme in French-speaking Switzerland) or a similar programme called "Rettet das Huhn". "That way the chickens can enjoy their autumn years." However, they would have to adapt to their new environment, as they come from a factory farming background of being fattened with high-energy feed.

Animal awareness

Is the chicken currently Switzerland's 'in' pet? "We can't really say, as we don't have the comparative figures," says Furrer. Nonetheless, there does seem to be something of a craze for the animal. Moreover, such outpourings of affection are not restricted to chickens. Social media abounds with heartwarming stories of cute mini pigs, although they don't belong in their owner's bed any more than the chicken. Veterinarian Bernd Schildger, former director of Dählhölzli Animal Park in Berne, which also includes Bern Bear Park, considers this a fundamental point. Schildger says:



Chickens renew their plumage after a year and stop laying eggs, making them commercially unviable. People often adopt these unproductive chickens. Photo: iStock

"The key is to look after the animals' interests. They aren't there just to please people – it's the same whether you keep blue whales, honeybees or

"More and more people want chickens. That may well have something to do with the Covid pandemic."

Sarah Camenisch, FSVO spokesperson

chickens." Schildger passionately supports the idea of people keeping animals, in principle. He believes people have grown estranged from nature and animals and have banned them from their environment and consciousness. "Why are slaughterhouses surrounded by barbed wire?" he asks. In other words: what people don't see leaves them cold. If bringing animals into households would make people more aware of them, that would be better for the animals.

Chickens sometimes live in the worst conditions for the sake of commerce, he says, therefore "private owners are doing something good". Of course, hens are more than just

egg providers. They have their own charm and personality. These amusing animals, who watch us alertly with tilted head and make us smile, are also communicative and thus rather noisy. That's why it is advisable to talk to the neighbours before getting one, says FSVO representative Camenisch.

Given that Swiss people have been known to go to court over church or cow bells, she makes a fair point. Still, chickens seem to be well-liked, adding a touch of rural Switzerland to all those urban gardens. There is no flip side either, unlike cats with their penchant for terrorising birds.

Animal welfare advocate Samuel Furrer also has an answer for those who would blame the cats: put collars with bells on them, and having more hedges and shrubs in private gardens would also provide a safe place for birds. Closeness to nature seems again to be the way forward.



Why take a chicken as a pet? Mainly for the eggs, hardly ever for the meat. Photo: iStock