

I have read that chickens are smart. Some say that they have similar abilities as mammals and primates. But, I suppose that some chickens are more intelligent than others, just as humans vary in intellectual abilities.

Some of the old sayings about chickens seem to be valid based on anecdotal observations. Our five hens and rooster seem to know that when I come to their yard in late afternoon it is time to go in. They walk up their ramp, one after another in an orderly fashion, and march into their coop. The rooster, a big white Plymouth Rock, usually goes in second, after the first hen enters the building.

This rooster is one lucky guy. Two years ago we had recently moved our young chickens to a wheeled coop that allowed us to give them fresh pasture daily while still keeping them under control. At night, they were secure in the netted “chicken tractor.” But, one night, some predator dug a hole that allowed it—or it and its buddies—access to the coop. They killed and ate chickens without any interference. When we went to the coop to do our morning chores, one solitary little white chick wandered about outside the coop, piteously peeping. Feathers and parts of the other fifteen lay about in the grass.

That one chick, by surviving the mass execution of his fellows, won himself a reprieve from the chopping block. These chickens were meant for the kitchen, to provide many delicious meals throughout the next winter. Instead, the white rooster became the patriarch of our little flock of hens.

I am somewhat afraid of him. I carry a little stick— a white stake from the portable electric fence—when I go into the coop to feed the chickens or pick up the fresh eggs. If I do not have a defensive tool with me, the rooster flies at my legs, spurs aimed at my calves. I would not turn my back to him.

When I let the chickens out of the coop in the mornings, I do not need to go into their yard. There is a cord I pull from the outside, and I fasten it in the chicken wire to keep the door open during the day. A hen comes out, and then the rooster, followed by the rest of the little red hens.

If chickens are so smart, I reasoned, the rooster should learn to crow on command. So, each morning, I stand outside the yard and yell “Crow!” at him. Within a minute he does just that. Of course, he often crows when he comes out in the morning, so I am not sure if he is learning to crow when told to do so, or if it is just his usual routine that drives him. Still, I am going to begin approaching the chicken yard at other times during the day. I will ask him to crow and see if he is as smart as he thinks he is.

He is a pretty rooster, pure white with a vivid red comb and headdress—whatever that is called on a rooster. I don’t really like him, but I admire him.