

Chickenology Part 2 with Tove Danovich

Ologies Podcast

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Oh hey, it's still your neighbor's daughter who approves of your mustache, Alie Ward. We're back with Part 2 of chickens, are you ready for this? Okay so, this guest who we met in the fabulous Part 1 this week, wrote the new book *Under the Henfluence*, and we had so many questions, we had to split this between two installments. So, welcome to Part 2.

But before we get into it, thank you to everyone at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies) for supporting the show for a buck or more a month and submitting questions for this. Thanks to everyone who tells a friend about the show and who subscribes, and rates, and leaves me reviews like a little treasure, including these farm-fresh ones. One from Christy who wrote:

Imagine my shock, while driving to my parents' home in Fitzgerald, Georgia and hearing the name of my hometown out of the blue. Yes, the occasional rooster makes its way to my parents' home. They're large, in charge, and absolutely beautiful.

Let's wrap up this chicken two-parter. Cuddle up in the coop and listen to us squawk about fairy eggs, dark yolks, relaxing clucks, pecking orders, beak accessories, spicy rats, awkward molting, chicken-on-chicken crime, pet chickens, and coop advice and more with hen mom, chicken researcher, journalist, and author of *Under the Henfluence: Inside the World of Backyard Chickens and the People Who Love Them*, chickenologist, Tove Danovich.

Alie: Augh! I have so many questions from listeners, can I just lob them at you?

Tove: Please.

Alie: Milas Robertson, first-time question-asker, says: I have friends who INSIST that brown eggs are healthier than white, and it means that the chicken was raised naturally; I think it's because of the breed of chicken. Who's right?

Tove: They are right. It's the breed of the chicken. That said, the brown egg-layers do tend to have a slightly higher feed-conversion ratio, so they need a little bit more food to lay those eggs. The white egg-layers have smaller bodies, so white eggs will tend to be the cheapest eggs still, because of that. [Alie gasps]

Aside: So yes, brown eggs are more expensive to produce in terms of feed. And for all the patrons who asked about egg color, looking at you Mira Simantov, Will Kingan, Alaina Cruson, Donia Conn, Anna Easton, Erin Knapp, Alyssa Elliot, Zoe D, Shoshana Belle, Elizabeth Weese, Shannon Feltus, and Paul Smith who wrote in: Talk to me about BLUE EGGS. Please.

So yes, there are many breeds and hybrids of chicken, and each chicken makes her own egg color, which doesn't change from one color to the next, ever. It's like, "This is my egg color." But different breeds of chickens tend to have their own color tendencies, and there are even chickens called Easter Eggers that produce pink, and dark brown, and sea glass blue, there are chickens that make mottled java-colored eggs, and olive-speckled treasures. I mean, olive ones! And blue eggs!

Tove: I will say, if you get eggs that are like blue or green, those chickens are really inefficient and probably a farm is not going to have those [Alie laughs] if they're going for high volume egg output. I always think that's kind of a nice little nod to what kind of conditions the flock was maybe raised

in or the ethos of the chicken keeper, if you have rainbow eggs because they're just very impractical.

Alie: I had no idea. But they're beautiful for the person that harvests them, right?

Tove: Yeah, they're delightful. I love them. We pick out, "Which eggs will I have today for my breakfast?" So, it feels special.

Aside: First-time question-asker Melissa Kane and Alison Farmer, who may or may not be a farmer wanted to know...

Alie: Do they get pissed that you take their eggs?

Tove: So, when chickens are broody, which is what we call it when they really want to, like, sit on a bunch of eggs and hatch them into chicks, you will sometimes get a hen who gets very fluffy and will peck at your fingers when you go to take the eggs from under her. The rest of the time, they're dropping an egg off and they're walking away, and they don't even notice [laughs] that I've taken them. So, most of the time they really don't care, it's only when they're like, "This is my clutch of my babies" that they, you know, even seem to note that those eggs are gone.

Aside: So, what about double yolks? So, we covered this in the Oology episode all about eggs, but for folks who asked, looking at you chicken-haver Gregory Kirchhofer, Ashley Oki, and Maria Muscarella, those double yolkers are typically laid by younger hens that are just boopin' out yolks from their robust ovaries faster than the shell-making department can keep up.

But so many of you, including Katie Seeger, Manasvi Verma, Brandi Harbaugh, Tony Benvenuti, Kata Zarándy, XtremeBee, Rachel and Ali, and Samantha Axtman asked why chickens are wasting all this energy to lay these unfertilized eggs that we make into yumyums? So, here's the deal, the chicken egg starts off as a yolk but if they are doing the nasty with a rooster, it'll get fertilized early in the egg process in the oviduct, or a spot called the infundibulum. And then it goes over to the magnum where the egg white forms and then it gets a shell, so that's kind of the order. The sperm happens early in the egg-making process. And if for some reason, their system skips a yolk, you have what's called a fart egg, a cock egg, a fairy egg, a witch egg, or a wind egg. A wind egg can also mean that it's soft-shelled, which can happen if a chicken gets too hot, or needs more calcium, or is eating too much spinach, or needs a trip to the vet, which patrons Doug Paice and Eleonoora wanted to know about.

And my life was fine until I saw that chicken-haver Chandler Witherington and Elta Sparks asked about lash eggs, Elta having seen them on lists of the grossest things people need help identifying. ["What is that?"] And apparently, a lash egg is an egg-shaped mass of tissue, puss, and yolk stuff and it has kind of a rubbery texture like leftover sausage. And these abominations are caused by a bacterial infection. And if you're too chicken to look up photos, just picture a Scotch egg made out of silly putty, it's really bad, it's very unpleasant visually.

Also, as long as we're discussing fleshy nubbins, let's talk rooster dicks. Surely a thing called a cock has one, right? Nah. Allow me to read you something from the scripture of CackleHatchery.com:

A rooster does not have a penis. An incubated egg that will become a rooster starts to develop a penis, but early in the second week of embryonic development, a cell death protein called BMP4 cloaks the incipient penis, causing it to stop developing and instead remain as a rudimentary nub.

You thought you understood the term cockblocker until you met the protein BMP4. Wow.

But back to the fertilized and unfertilized eggs. Okay, so sperm or not, these hens' bodies are making the eggs. If they were to get fertilized, they'd be fertilized *way* up in the egg-making process. And remember, their junglefowl ancestors lay just a few small clutches a year and most of those do get fertilized because it's nature and people be bangin'. But these domesticated chickens are just on hyper-speed in the egg-laying department, and they live in a convent. But do they know?

Alie: Do they tend to know when one is fertilized? Will they remember like, "I definitely boned the other day, [*Tove laughs*] these are probably fertilized."?

Tove: I don't think so because we don't have roosters and my hens still go broody, which is also another genetic thing. Most farmers have bred broodiness out of the commercial strains because when a hen goes broody, she's like, "I've laid 12 eggs, this is enough, I don't need to lay anymore. I'm going to sit on these eggs and stop it." And the farmers are like, "I would like to have more eggs please." [*Alie laughs*] And now that we have commercial incubators, you really don't need a good broody hen that will sit on eggs and hatch out new ones, which you used to, it used to be very important because it's how you get more chickens. But yeah, they're like, "This is a waste of time, let's get chickens that don't want to be mothers at all." [*both laugh*] So, that's more of what we have.

But a couple of our hens love to go broody. They will sit on anything; they will sit on nothing. There are some very funny videos of people with a hen that was trying to be broody on a lightbulb [*laughs*] or other round objects. So yeah, their hormones just get switched on and they're like, "I want to sit on things and make them warm."

Aside: Also, sidenote, apparently if you leave eggs in a nest box too long, some hens will be like, "Well, this is just a snack I made with my butt," and they'll eat them, which is why it's good to keep an eye on your hens and harvest at least once a day so they don't make breakfast out of something that was part of their bodies.

But this brings up a related query. So, patron Emma Giles who works with a local Boy's & Girl's Club that young Persia asked: Are chickens cannibals? Persia, you weren't the only person that needed an answer to this. Bronwin, Rebekah Hatherly, Emma Donovan, Ale Guerrero, and first-time question-asker Bel all needed to know too.

Alie: Some people asked, are chickens cannibals? Bel, first-time question-asker said: Naturally, I'm coming in hot with a weird one, what's the deal with chicken cannibalism? So, so many folks. This is the first I have heard of this. [*whispers with frightened tone*] Are chickens cannibals?

Tove: So, chickens are omnivores, they do eat you know like, bugs is usually more their normal meat. But I've heard of chickens eating mice, and lizards, and things like that. [*Alie gasps*] Usually, cannibalism is not a natural behavior. I would go so far as to say it's not really a super natural, everyday behavior throughout most of the animal kingdom anyway. But it does happen pretty regularly on farms because they are in such crowded stressful conditions that, for whatever reason, this is one of the behaviors that will happen. There is something that even chickens in a small flock will occasionally do, where if a hen or a rooster is injured and they see that, they might peck at the injury, which then makes it worse and causes problems. So, that can be a problem on these farms too, as is feather picking and they'll basically make these other chickens half bald. But it's a stress response.

The way that the industry has dealt with that is that all hens, chickens are de-beaked, usually when they're like a day old. They used to use a hot blade to do it, now I think it's, like, infrared somehow, which is supposedly a little bit more exact. But it makes it so while they can peck, the beak doesn't curve down all the way so they can't do as much damage. But it's, you know, pretty controversial.

The chickens' beak has a lot of nerve endings in it and it's kind of their primary sense organ, like how they explore the world is by pecking at things, seeing what it feels like, and if it's food or not food.

Aside: So, patron Emily Stauffer wanted to know if debeaking is at all humane? And Asha Ramakumar says that they're studying farmed animal law and want to know: What are the psychological effects of debeaking? And I did look into a few papers, including the 2018 *Advances in Poultry Welfare* study, "Feather pecking and cannibalism: Can we really stop beak trimming?" Which says that:

Inter-bird pecking such as feather pecking, vent pecking...

That's buttock attacks,

... and cannibalistic tissue pecking are injurious, and have highly detrimental effects on bird welfare... The practice of beak trimming can reduce mortality and injury, however beak trimming also has adverse consequences of bird welfare and is widely regarded as an unacceptable method of controlling bird behavior. A number of European countries have now banned beak trimming or plan to do so.

[“So, what do we do?”] While a 2020 study published in the journal *Poultry Science* titled, “Effects of plastic anti-pecking devices on the production performance, beak length, and behavior in Chinese Wannan chickens,” did fit some chickens with pads, plastic anti-pecking devices which, the study says, appears to be effective at reducing mortality and plumage damage.

But there are also chicken blinders that you can affix to their tiny, cute faces that allow the chicken to see dirt and scratch around and they can feed, but looking forward blocks their vision of other chickens. I did look up chicken blinders and according to the Amazon reviews, they are 1,000% more hilarious when you stick googly eyes on them.

Also, highly recommend that you read reviews of chicken products because they contain tales such as:

I was skeptical of the peepers but let me tell you, Fabio, our roo, immediately chilled out and left Winnie, his girl, alone. I don't hear any more crying or chicken ruckus, nor are there chicken feathers piled up like a crime scene.

So, get into those reviews if you are in need of detailed gossip about hens, which is just the amount of pettiness that feels good but hurts no one. 10 out of 10, would read again.

But there are also anti-chicken assault options like foul-tasting feather sprays you can use to discourage inter-chicken bullying, or little jackets that you can put on your chickens. But in big commercial operations, at least in the US, debeaking and beak trimming still happens and is the norm.

Tove: So yeah, that is mostly how we deal with the potential of chicken cannibalism, which does happen but is not a super natural behavior in the species.

Alie: Augh, was news to me!

Tove: Yeah.

Aside: This next question was on the minds of Amy Narimatsu, Laura Jordens-Harris, Emily P, and Rebecca Goerling who asked: Do they have chicken fight club when we're not looking? And this was also needed to know by first-time question-askers Amos Lomayestewa, McBride, Katie Nickles, and...

Alie: Cynthia Zhou says: What are chicken social structures like? The term “pecking order” is often used to describe hierarchies – how are chicken societies formed and maintained? And Kai, another first-time question-asker, asked if hens swap places from who is mama hen and who isn’t? I never realized that pecking order came from chickens. [*“I had no idea.”*]

Tove: It does! It does come from chickens. I love the pecking order origin story. There was this Norwegian zoologist...

Aside: One Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe, who at the age of 19 wrote “The Voices of Chickens: A Contribution to the Psychology of Chickens,” and later a dissertation, “*Gallus domesticus* in its Daily Life,” which earned him his PhD and what we can now call chickenology. Tove explains his findings.

Tove: He had, like, a country home out by his grandparents that he would go to as a little boy and there were chickens nearby and he was like, “I’m really obsessed with these chickens.” And he got out these notebooks and was just studying chickens for years. And I think when he was 19, he published about the chicken social structure which he referred to as the pecking order, where essentially the most dominant chickens get first dibs on the best food, and the best perching spots, and the best sunbathing spots. So, it was just this guy that was really into chickens, and watched them, and did this discovery that... You know, people hadn’t really studied a lot of social structures in animals at that point at all, which now of course is a huge thing, how we relate to each other.

I think when people think about the pecking order, they think it’s going to be more of a ladder where it’s like, “I’m first and you’re tenth.” But I’ve discovered it’s a little bit more triangle shaped. So, in my flock, Peggy, who is my only of the first three chickens that is still with us, she is the head hen and she is a benevolent ruler, I like to say. So, when the other chickens fight, she will actually run in between them and break up the fight and she’ll just stand there. And then if they start again, whoever has started it, she’ll run over and give them a big peck which I always think is the funniest thing to watch. I’m like, “Good job Peggy.” [*“Congratulations Peggy.”*] But yeah, it’s kind of like a couple of the next oldest ones are beneath her, and then on the rung under that there are some of the younger ones. And it does fluctuate a little bit too.

But a really interesting thing about that is sometimes you bring a new chicken into the flock and it’s kind of chaos because they have to figure out where this new chicken fits in the pecking order. And the way they do that is by fighting, which is not super fun to watch and you’re like, “Why can’t you all just get along?” But they can actually infer where the other chickens are, so they don’t have to fight every single other chicken. They’re like, “Great, I beat the number two chicken so I must be below the head hen and above everyone else,” and then they can kind of go on their merry ways.

Alie: I just had no idea, but I absolutely love the idea that they are working it out.

Tove: Yeah. They are, they are figuring it out. I’ve definitely had hens where, briefly, one of them will have a problem with the other. I don’t know why, I don’t know what drama happens specifically but for a while, one of them, if she goes up to another, she will get pecked and run off, and then a few months later, they’re fine again. I’m like, I don’t know what happened but I’m so curious. It’s like a soap opera in your backyard.

Alie: I imagine that there’s a lot of watching chickens that happens when you have chickens.

Tove: There’s a lot of chicken watching. It’s very relaxing. I have a yard that requires weeding, which is not fun to do but having chickens for company makes it seem like an exciting thing we’re all doing together, and the chickens love when I weed because I’m digging up all these worms, and dirt, and they’re like, “This is amazing.” So, I’m just hanging out in the yard doing my weeding and they like to make this lovely burbling sound back and forth. [*chicken burbles and bocks*] It’s just kind of a

check-in with the flock where it's like, "I'm okay, you're okay, everything is good." They just do this quiet chatting whenever they're outside, and it's so relaxing to listen to, and they're fun to watch. It's very meditative to have chickens because they're always up to something but the stakes feel low, at least to me.

Alie: *[laughs]* I love that... It's like a low stakes-high drama but beautiful situation.

Tove: Exactly.

Alie: A lot of people wanted to know what chickens eat. Alyssa Elliott says: My chickens love zucchini and squash, but they REFUSE to eat any of the peel/rind. They're also picky jerks and they don't eat table scraps. Jenn 'Squirrel' Alvarez wants to know: Is there anything a chicken won't eat? Rachel Casha says: Everybody knows pigs will eat anything, but no one ever talks about how chickens eat anything. Erin Gunderson said on TikTok they saw someone feeding chicken steak!

Aside: A lot of you needed the scoop on chicken feed such as Ellie Cooper, first-time question-asker Kat Walton, Anna Easton, Adam Dunn, Mary Concannon, Shelby Mills, Brian Hiatt, Mark Hewlette, and Robin Stumbo who traumatized me by writing in: When I was a kid I saw a chicken chase after and swallow a mouse whole and I've never been the same, and I've heard they're also really into bugs. Are there any estimates of how much of a chicken's diet animals make up?

Alie: What do they eat in general?

Tove: Yeah, I mean, they are omnivores so they can kind of eat anything except for things that are bad for them. So, in the yard, they love grass, mine love dandelion greens in particular, that's a special delicacy. They love grapes, they love red fruits, and bugs also. But yeah, they can eat most things, there is a small list of stuff like, I think avocado is really bad for chickens, citrus, don't give them junk food, it's just not great for anyone, even if technically it might be fine. But they can eat anything. They can technically eat meat. I've seen people feed chicken to chicken, which there's some pathogen risk also, maybe a little weird, but technically they can in fact eat that. So yeah, they're equal opportunity.

That said, they do have preferences. So, mine certainly have things that they will turn their nose up at and I think some of that is because they're also very spoiled so they're like, "We get treats every day and we have this great food so unless you're giving us the finest scraps, I don't even need it."

Aside: And if you've ever wondered why your sister-in-law's chickens' yolks are so much more orange than the ones at the store, it's their diet. So, more carotenoids means deeper-hued yolks, and patron Scott Hanley asked: Is feeding chickens red pepper seed flakes a real thing to get deep orange to reddish yolks? And hot dang Scott, according to the 2012 paper, "Effect of Red Pepper Powder or Red Pepper Pigment on the Performance and Egg Yolk Color of Laying Hens," yes, feeding your hens red pepper will deepen the yolk color. But a little goes a long way, like one cup in 25 pounds of feed should do it. But won't your hens be crying at you and begging for milk? [*"Ahh, get the milk, get more milk ready."*]

Alie: That does make me want to ask, AJ Gray said: I read somewhere that chickens aren't affected by spicy food. Anna-Lisa, Michael, and first-time question-asker, Hannah Smith all asked about chickens tasting spicy stuff. But AJ Gray says they heard about this, they gave their in-laws' chickens some Flamin' Hot Cheetos [*Tove laughs*] and it was like an instant coop disco party, they went wild for them, but AJ was worried that they were burning their little beaks off. So, what exactly is going on with chickens and spicy things?

Tove: Yeah, so like a lot of birds, I guess they have the capsaicin receptors, but they're not turned on, so they cannot taste spice or feel the heat from spice. So, I know some people, especially if you feed

backyard birds and your squirrels are eating it all the time, you can get special bird seed that's coated in hot pepper that's supposed to make squirrels not like it because the birds won't notice. So yeah, the Flamin' Hot is not flaming hot for chickens, they're just like, "Great it's a corn puff, this is amazing."

Alie: Ahh! And that's why they had a disco party?

Tove: Probably.

Alie: Just because of the corn puffs. And who wouldn't, what a texture, you know?

Tove: Love a corn puff.

Alie: And on that note of eating anything, Claire Netto wants to know: Is it true that chickens eat rocks on purpose?

Tove: They do! [*Excuse me?*] Yeah, little bitty rocks. So, you know, you may have noticed, chickens don't have teeth, and so how they and other birds grind down their food is they have this area called the gizzard and they put like, tiny little rocks and pebbles and stuff in there that hangs out and it kind of squishes it like a mortar and pestle system until it's broken down enough to travel down the rest of their intestines and out the other side. So, they do need a small amount of rocks, not all the time though. They'll kind of figure it out as long as the things are there for them to get.

But it's also why chickens, like a lot of other birds, and super susceptible to heavy metal poisoning. Say a dog eats zinc or a lead pellet or something like that, they will just poop it out the other end, it's not really a big deal.

Aside: In small amounts, relatively speaking.

Tove: But for chickens, that piece of metal will sit in their gizzard, and it will get ground down into flakes, over time spreading that throughout their bodies. So, that's why that's a really big issue. And I've actually had one of my hens, briefly went blind from zinc poisoning because she got hold of probably a little piece of a nail, which is made out of galvanized metal or something like that, and it was just getting ground in her gizzard for a while and clearly worked out of her system before it did too terrible of damage. But yeah, it's a wild system.

Alie: Well, that brings me to a couple questions, Potato Puffer and Whitney both asked about, in Potato Puffer, first-time question-asker's words: How big of a concern is lead contamination in backyard chicken eggs? And Whitney said: I saw a study from Australia showing that eggs from backyard coops had way more lead due to the presence of heavy metals in the soil, this seems to have been in areas where neighborhoods were built atop old industrial zones. So, should testing eggs be more commonplace? Whitney wants to know. Is this something you've heard much about?

Tove: I've definitely heard of it. I think it certainly is worth thinking about if you're getting backyard chickens, especially if you live in a really urban environment or have an old house, there's a strong likelihood that at some point there was lead paint that might have flaked off, or pipes in the soil. A really easy way, if that's something you're worried about, is get a soil test and then you will know what kind of metals and other things are in your soil. I will say that birds are so sensitive to a lot of that stuff and they're small that I, personally, unless I regularly had a lot of hens that were getting sick from it, I would personally assume that it was fine for me.

Aside: And for more on this you can see the recent episodes on Domicology and Environmental Toxicology, or our older episodes on Plumology, feathers, Ornithology, pelicans, et cetera, which are linked in the show notes because we want you to have them.

But before we move on, we're going to throw some money at an ologist-approved cause and this week it's going to Second Hen'd, which is a nonprofit that rescues egg-laying hens past their prime, AKA spent hens, and finds them loving homes to live out their days as pets. So, you can find out more about them at the link in the show notes, that was Second Hen'd. And thank you sponsors for making those weekly donations possible.

[Ad Break]

And back to your questions, this time about chicken makeovers.

Alie: What about molting? Brita Goldstein, first-time question-asker: Why do my chickens choose the bitter coldest part of the year to molt? And Tina Hoang wants to know: Do chickens ever molt from the ass up? Apparently, one of their chickens, her name is Pudding, gets butt bald once a year. Tina says that they don't like looking at Pudding's butt, BUT she is their favorite chicken. So yeah, why do they have feathers on their feet? Suzie wants to know. Also, I cannot believe no one asked this so I'm going to, but I'd like to know if it's odd or if it's satisfying to look at videos of bumblefoot?

Tove: [laughs] These are all good questions, and you'll have to remind me if I've forgotten one of them.

Alie: There were like 10 that I just launched at you, but yes.

Tove: Yeah, [laughs] I should just write them down.

Alie: So, molting. Why are they molting in the cold and why do they molt from the butt up?

Tove: I don't think they specifically molt from the butt up, maybe your chicken is just a special, unique flower. If it were me and I always had a chicken with the bare butt, especially at a certain time of year, I might wonder about mites, or maybe there's feather-picking going on, or some other issue in that area that's causing feather loss. That said, they do molt, they look very silly and sad, they don't like being picked up because all their little quill feathers are pushing out and it doesn't feel very good. ["Thank golly you're prickly."] It's probably like a baby teething but it's all over your body. So, they get pretty grumpy when they're molting.

They do tend to do it in fall-winter, I would imagine that has to do with the fact that, when a bird is molting, their feathers have gotten kind of raggedy, they're not as insulating as they were before. And so, while it might seem a little bit weird to us, by having peak feathers for the coldest time of the year, they're actually better able to insulate themselves on cold days because they have these nice fresh, perfectly zipped up feathers that are doing the things that feathers are supposed to do.

So yeah, it takes about 2 months for a molt to start and finish. Some years I have chickens that... they just molt a little bit and then the next year they're like half bald and look really sad, which usually people just refer to it as a hard molt. But yeah, it's an important process, they look really silly but they're doing what they're supposed to do.

Aside: But for those who relish the chance to see stuff coming out of strangers' pores, you'll love bumblefoot, where a chicken's dinosaur foot gets a giant, nasty blackhead.

Alie: Have you ever picked at a bumblefoot?

Tove: I have. I actually was just looking at my flock and I think one of them has a little bumble starting so I have to do that. ["Love it, love it."] I usually don't find it satisfying. That said, I just watched a video yesterday [laughs] where someone found a bumble between their chicken's toes and just kind of popped it out and I was like, "This is better than a Dr. Pimple Popper video for sure." And I know bumblefoot, it's like a bacterial infection similar to a staph infection, it might actually be staph bacteria. So, it forms this hard kernel and to remove the infection, you have to cut or pop the kernel out. But yeah, chicken surgery isn't my favorite pastime.

Alie: DIY chicken surgery. There's a hobby for everyone.

Tove: So, it's a wild world out there.

Alie: Last question... Or two more listener questions. Jamie Simons, first-time question-asker says: I've heard chickens mourn when one in the flock dies. For people with backyard chickens, how do we help with this? Is that true?

Tove: They do, yeah. As the existence of the pecking order should kind of reveal, they are social animals, they have relationships with each other, they can have friendships or brief enemy-ships.

I really only saw proper grieving in my flock for the first loss, and they were pretty young at the time and did this sound that... So, when chicks are separated from their mothers, they do this special peep that I call, 'the lost chick call' and it's, you know, like a little homing signal and, "I'm distressed, come get me, return me to the rest of my flock." So, one of our dogs got our chicken and now the dogs and chicken do not share outside time together anymore after that. But the flock was doing this really loud version of specifically, the lost chick call, right after that happened for a while. [*loud, frequent bocks*] It just broke my little heart. I already liked chickens before but that really did change my relationship to them significantly. It's hard to see creatures grieving and not feel like there's a lot going on.

Aside: For more on this, you can see the Corvid Thanatology episodes on crow funerals because crows have funerals. Or there's the Thanatology episode from this past July on grief. And yeah, you can grieve a chicken, and a chicken can also grieve a chicken, from what we understand. First-time question-asker, Alyssa Persau asked: Do chickens get lonely if their flock mates die and if they are the only one left? How can you tell? Tove can.

Tove: Yeah, they do, I mean I've also heard of some chickens, if they have a particularly close friendship and the other dies, the remaining chicken will get clearly depressed and not eat or drink and just kind of sit, fluffed up for a while. And I think, you know, like people, hopefully eventually they get through it. They have friends, and they lose friends, and it's hard for them like it would be for all of us.

Alie: Do you eat chickens or no?

Tove: I don't anymore.

Alie: That's what I figured.

Tove: It was actually after that chicken died, I was like, "I just can't anymore." My chickens go to the vet when they're sick too, so it felt very silly to be paying to save one chicken and then paying to eat other chickens.

Alie: And also, you must get plenty of protein with eggs.

Tove: I do. All the eggs! I am set.

Alie: Last listener question, Savannah Frost wants to know: Is getting backyard chickens worth it? How do you, essentially, what, bunch of people...

Aside: The big question, asked by potential chicken-havers Kelly Shaver, Maité Huerta, Danae DeJournett, Celena Hsiung, Tamara Coutinho, Montana Flynn, Brittany Shafis, Caroline Clancy, Amelia Frank, Taylor Clinton, Trinity Higgs, Scarlet Ponder, Amelia Heins, Megan Duffy, Megan Thompson, Emily P, Riley, Lydia Lambe, Elder Zamora, Ashley Oki, and Feather Evans all want to know: Should they get chickens? Will the chickens love them? Do chickens make good pets? Can you boop a chicken? Should we let chickens into our lives and our homes?

Alie: What advice do you have for people considering getting some backyard chickens?

Tove: Yeah. Do your research. I mean, you are bringing an animal home, so be prepared to take care of that animal. I think it's kind of obvious yet it's surprising how many people don't do that.

I mentioned this earlier, but starting off with a really good coop is going to make life better for you. I talked about predators that will eat your chickens but another thing you should definitely think about is rodents because, unless you live in Alberta, Canada that somehow has no rats, rats are everywhere. You may not see them, but they live around you and eventually they will find your coop and try to get inside it. So, if you do things to store the food in galvanized tins, and have the coop set up in such a way that rats can't tunnel underneath it, you and your flock will be so much happier in the future. So, there's a lot of preparation stuff like that.

But they're really lovely animals. I know some people get them and decide that they're not for them, you do have to think about if you're going out of town like any other pet that you have, who is going to take care of them? But they're very charismatic. If you garden, great for compost, there's a lot to recommend the chicken.

I also think they're an amazing pet if you have kids because the chores can really be scaled up very easily depending on their age. So, you might have a three-year-old that just helps collect the eggs, and then as they get older, they actually change the water. And the chickens are outside, which makes it a lot easier to not have something happen when you're not there to supervise. So, I think they can be a really fun pet in addition to the fact that if you get one of the giant breeds of chickens and a small child holds it, the chicken is as big as the small child and it's the cutest thing. [*Alie laughs*] So, for that reason alone.

Alie: Aww, yeah Claire Norrell, first-time question-asker, wanted to know: What's the best argument to finally convince my wife to let me have chickens? In case she cracks, what kind of chickens should a complete newb start with? Is it good to entice someone into getting chickens by looking at all the cool chickens you can get? Or should you start with, like, the Honda Civic of chickens?

Tove: It probably depends on who you're arguing with. So, if your partner is someone that is really susceptible to cute things, then you probably want to show them Silkies because they look like fluffy cloud Muppets, or other Bantams with boots and beards because they're so adorable and you will still get eggs from them.

But if you're with someone very practical then be like, yeah, we can get these eggs in our backyard, it's definitely a great deal, look at all these grocery store shortages. And just don't think about the fact that you will almost definitely spend more money on your chickens than you would [*both laugh*] on eggs at the store, but it's still great.

Alie: But it's a way of life as well, right?

Tove: Yeah, it's a community. I do... I feel like the chicken internet is just such a nice place is the other thing. I've met so many chicken people now over the years and they're all just really nice people.

Aside: And if you're not following her flock, you can check out her chickens Instagram account @BestLittleHenHouse which has over 100,000 people gawking at her sweet hens and her little cabin coop. It's a mood and it is a good one.

Tove: Even social media, typically as you get a larger account, the comments you get can be kind of weird. But chicken people are so nice, and they just want to talk about how great chickens are and how pretty your chickens are. So, it's a delightful little corner.

Alie: Somehow, I think partly because I started researching chickenology, if that was a term, I started getting a lot of chickens in my feed. [*“The chicken feed.”*] And the internet definitely, my algorithm definitely thinks that I am considering chickens and it’s not wrong. [*both laugh*]

Tove: Yeah, that’s definitely happened to a lot of friends of mine. They’re like, “I started following your chickens’ Instagram account and now I just get chickens in my feed constantly.” To which I say, I’m sorry/you’re welcome.

Alie: I think it’s a good problem to have, to want a chicken. And just the idea of going to the post office and they’re like, “I’ve got a little package for you.”

Tove: Here they are, they’re peeping, [*little peeps*] the cutest thing.

Aside: I love hearing your reactions to the episodes, and on this week’s discussion thread on Patreon, Cnidarian Knight wrote in: As a mail carrier I can confirm that it is glorious whenever we get chicks in, and you can hear them throughout the whole building. And Scott Hanley wrote: As a retired mailman, I have experienced my share of peeping boxes and I used to prank the clerks by whistling in a peeping fashion similar to the chicks that would cause confusion and looks of concern as if they missed a box of live chicks. The Motley Lion also wrote in and said:

As a postal worker, rural delivery, I deliver chicks, baby turkeys, baby geese, frogs, turtles, reptiles, insects such as spiders and scorpions, cockroaches, crickets, and bees. When I cannot get ahold of a customer by phone to pick up their baby chicks, say, because they’re Amish or they don’t have a phone, I will make a special trip to deliver them.

And Marci Smith has mail ordered baby chickens and had a carrier drive his personal car on a Sunday morning to make sure the chickies didn’t get too cold overnight. So, Marci said: Go postal workers! And I echo that. But what does Tove not appreciate?

Alie: What about... Something’s got to suck about having chickens. Worst thing about having chickens, be real. Be real with us.

Tove: Yeah, I mean the rats are not great, they’re so smart it’s just like, kind of a losing battle and I don’t like just killing things forever. So really, you know, preparing to chicken-proof your coop castle is good.

But I think honestly, the hardest thing about chickens is they die and it’s hard, like any other animal you spend a lot of time with and get attached to... I have this flock, we have more eggs than we can eat, but when any single one of them dies, it’s really sad. And they have died for any number of reasons and it’s always earlier than you want them to. And many chicken people, myself included, I think become surprised by how attached you can get to these weird little reptilian-looking birds that are so different from us but also so personable.

Alie: And so lovable! There must be so much to love about chickens, but what do you love the most about chickens, or about studying chickens to become a chicken author?

Tove: [*laughs*] Yeah, I think, you know, one of the things that’s really great about chickens is that everyone seems to have a connection to them. Maybe you didn’t raise chickens, but some member of your family did, or a friend did. I feel like no matter where you are in the world, people have a chicken story to tell you. So, it’s been really fun when just in conversation people ask me what I do, and I’m writing this book about chickens somehow, and then they just tell me a chicken story, and it might be a really nice story, or it might be the mean rooster that chased them on the farm when they were a kid. [*laughs*] I think it’s something that, they spread around the world, they’re in every culture, even today. It’s something that we all just have this weird connection with, more so I think than other farm animals that are bigger. So, I really love that about chickens. I love the little sounds

that they make, I mentioned it's relaxing. But I think the best thing is, they're really soft. You wouldn't think about it but they're so soft and it's so nice to just dig your fingers into their floofy feathers.

Alie: Aww, I gotta go pet a chicken.

Tove: You do.

Alie: I definitely will be getting your book and we'll see if there are some chickens in my future.

Tove: Yeah, there might be.

Alie: There might be.

Tove: I'm so glad to share the world of chickens with all of the ologites out there.

Alie: There's going to be a lot of chicken owners, I love it.

Tove: Just tell me, tell me about your chickens. I want to hear it all.

So, ask lovely people about what they love, don't be a chicken. But maybe get a chicken, it's really up to you, but Tove can help. Again, her book is geniusly titled, *Under the Henfluence*. And you can follow her and her flock on Instagram @BestLittleHenHouse, her Instagram and Twitter are also linked in the show notes. And if you're considering getting her book, it's linked there too. It's also probably at any bookstore you pop into or Bookshop.org. We are @Ologies on Twitter and Instagram, I'm @AlieWard on both and on TikTok @Alie_Ologies.

Smologies are shorter, kid-friendly, G-rated episodes available at the link in the show notes or at AlieWard.com/Smologies. Thank you, Mercedes Maitland for editing those and Zeke Rodrigues Thomas for working on them too. Erin Talbert admins the *Ologies* Podcast Facebook group with assists from Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus. *Ologies* merch is available at OlogiesMerch.com, thank you Susan Hale for managing that and running so much behind the scenes, and Noel Dilworth manages the scheduling impeccably. Emily White of The Wordary makes our professional transcripts and they're up for free at AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras and they're linked in the show notes. Kelly R. Dwyer makes websites including ours and maybe yours. Jarrett Sleeper and Mark David Christenson assistant edit. And the benevolent Mercedes Maitland is top chicken in the editing henhouse; thank you Mercedes for all you do. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music.

And if you stick around to the end of the show, I'll tell you a secret. And this week's secret is that I went to a botanical garden a few weeks ago and I picked up a little stick and it had the perfect groove to rub your thumb on it and it's just a great size and shape to sit there and fidget with and I've kept this stick in my pocket for almost two weeks now. [*chuckles*] Goes from pocket to pocket and I just have a fiddling stick. And I wanted the stick to feel special, like, "You're not just a stick I put in my pocket, you're my special fiddling stick." So, I painted the end of it with just a little bit of gold nail polish as if to tell it, "You're an object that I deliberately like to have around." So yeah, sometimes you just find a really good small stick and it's just a new friend that hangs out with you when you're at a cocktail party mingling and you just need something to play with. So, get yourself a good stick for the most part they're very affordable... They're just on the ground. Okay, berbye.

Transcribed by Aveline Malek at TheWordary.com

Links to things we discussed:

[See Tove on her 2023 book tour!](#)

Buy Tove's book: [Under the Henfluence: Inside the World of Backyard Chickens and the People Who Love Them](#)

Visit Tove's [website](#) and follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)

Follow Tove's chickens on [Instagram](#)

A donation went to [Second Hen'd](#)

[Polynesians brought chickens to Americas before Columbus](#)

[Chickenology is real, ok?](#)

[LA City Ordinance about chickens](#)

['Ethical' eggs could save male chicks from mass slaughter](#)

[Top 6 Utterly Cute Chicken Breeds \(with Pictures\)](#)

[Dr. Peter Biggs 2009 autobiography via the American Association of Avian Pathologists Biographies of Professionals in Poultry Health](#)

[Chicken cognition](#)

[Easter Egger Chicken Egg Colors](#)

[What's the best name for a pet chicken?](#)

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[Fitzgerald's Wild Chicken Festival](#)

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