

The Chicken



Chickens were first domesticated over 4000 years ago. The ancestry of current day chickens has been traced back to the wild jungle fowl of South East Asia. In particular, the *red jungle fowl* is considered to be the main ancestor of today's domestic chickens.

During the last few centuries farmers and other chicken breeders have raised poultry for specific purposes. Originally, some did this for the sport of cock fighting; others bred for eggs (utility) or meat (consumption). More recently, fanciers (or hobbyists) bred for more specific features such as feather pattern and colour, size, shape, and other combinations of physical features.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, poultry associations in various countries developed standards and a way to classify different breeds.

A breed of poultry is identified by similar physical features such as size, shape, and skin colour, number of toes and leg type. When bred together they should produce offspring with the same characteristics. A few examples include White Leghorns, Rhode Island Reds and Australorps.

There are different varieties within many breeds. These have the same basic features; however they vary in areas such as comb type, feather colour and feather patterns. The various varieties of Wyandottes are a good example.

Poultry are bred for either commercial reasons or as a hobby. Those who are serious hobby breeders are often called fanciers. These people try to breed to a standard and are often involved in showing their poultry in competitions where judges compare chickens of the same breed against a specified set of standards. In this case, the fancier is breeding for appearance; therefore the egg laying ability (utility) of the breed is of less importance and is negatively impacted over the years.

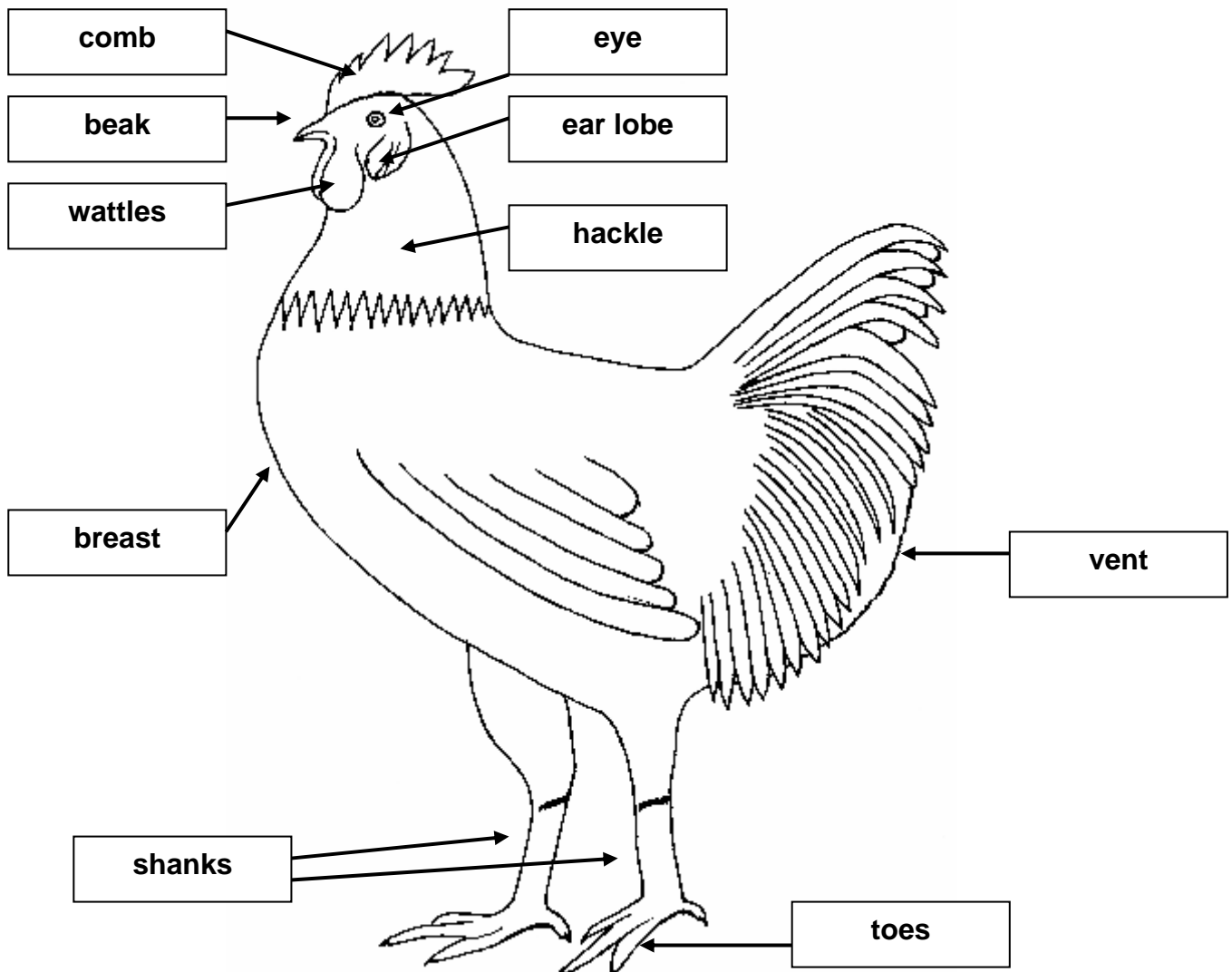
Likewise, the person who has a few backyard chickens as a hobby and the average farmer who has a dozen or two around the farm allow their poultry to breed randomly, thus often impacting the purity of their breed and the egg laying ability of their chickens.

In the commercial industry, in particular the *egg industry*, the birds are selectively bred for their ability to lay large numbers of eggs. Some of these egg producing hens are laying over 300 eggs in a year, whereas the average egg producing hen back in the 1950s only laid around 150 eggs per year.

During the 50s, 60s and 70s the White Leghorn was popular on egg farms. Some kept the black Australorp. Other used a crossbreed such as the Australorp crossed with the white leghorn. Today, most egg farmers keep *hybrids* which are crosses of crosses several times over. The exact breeds are not well documented publicly.

Present day broiler farms (meat industry) have also developed a *hybrid* unlike any purebreds. Their birds reach a market weight in approximately six weeks. These birds have been selectively bred to grow quickly in the shortest possible timeframe. In addition, they have a diet which promotes high growth.

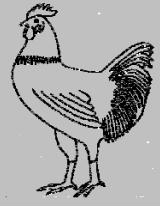
Parts of the chicken



Feathers on a chicken help to protect it and keep it warm. The comb and lobes assist in keeping the chicken cooler. This occurs as blood circulates throughout the comb and wattles. Chickens also spread their wings out to help with cooling. Both methods are important for the chicken as they do not sweat like other animals; therefore they have no other cooling mechanism.

The earlobe is a handy identification tag for egg colour. If the earlobe is red the chicken will lay brown or cream coloured eggs. If the earlobe is white, the egg colour is also white.

The Chicken



1. Where do the ancestors of most modern day chickens probably come from? _____
2. What particular breed is believed to be the ancestor of most breeds today? _____
3. If poultry are bred for utility reasons, what does this actually mean? _____
4. Why do you think some chickens are bred for eggs while others are bred for consumption? _____

5. Identify two important differences *you think exist* between chickens bred for eggs and those bred for consumption.

Chicken bred for eggs _____

Chickens bred for consumption _____

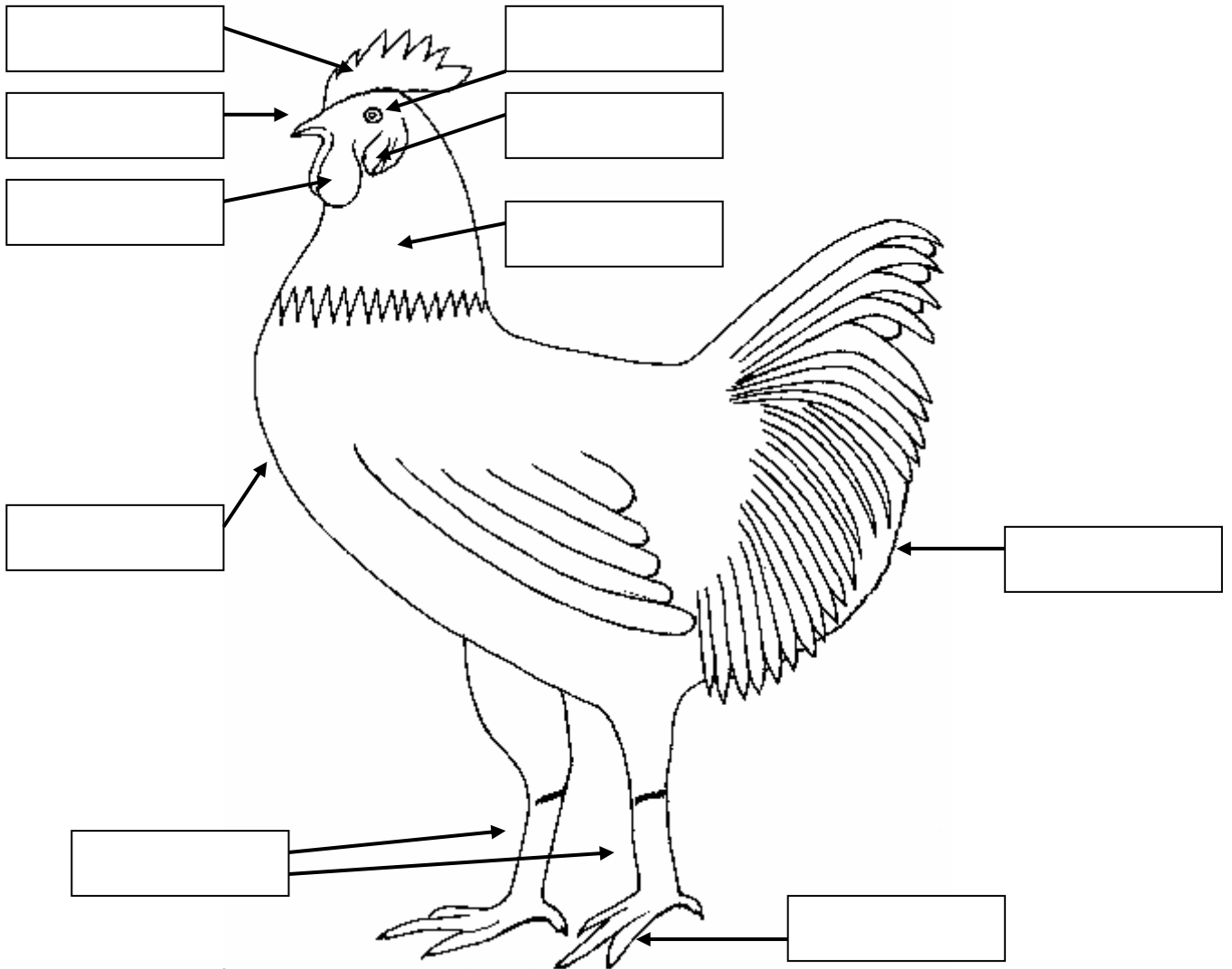
6. What do you think is the most important aspect when identifying poultry as a **breed**? _____

7. Name three things that can vary within the same breed.

8. What organisation developed standards for different breeds? _____

1. People who are most likely to put their poultry into shows (or competitions) are known as _____.
 2. What number of eggs can one expect from current day chickens bred for egg laying? _____
 3. How many eggs did hens lay back in the 1950s? _____
 4. What might happen on a farm if chickens breed randomly?

 5. Name one breed that was popular for farmers to keep (for eggs) in the 50s, 60s and 70s? _____
 6. What type of chickens are kept by most egg farms these days? _____
 7. What do we call farms that keep meat birds? _____
 8. How long does it take meat birds to reach a marketable size? _____
 9. What is special about the comb and lobes? _____
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10. What other strategy do poultry use to keep cool during warm weather? _____
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11. The Rhode Island Red is red colour. It has a normal single comb and red lobes. What colour egg does it lay?

Label the parts of a chicken

toes	ear lobe	hackle	wattles	breast
shanks	eye	vent	beak	comb