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Chickens: Livestock or Pets?

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Gold sex-link hen

I have been pondering this question for days now. Are chickens, like Sunflower (pictured here), livestock or pets? Until recently, I had not given it much thought. But when suddenly, I had to give my four hens away, I realized just how attached I was to them. This got me to thinking... most governing bodies consider chickens livestock, but I have a hunch that most chicken keepers, with small flocks, think of them as pets.

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When I first acquired the girls, as one day old chicks, I did not really think of them as pets. But as they grew, and we became more acquainted, I realized that they each had their own unique personality. For example, Sweet Pea was the first to climb into my hand when I feed them. Rosie would occasionally peck me when I went to pick her up. And Sunflower was the loner in the group.

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Since my birds were all the same breed they looked almost identical. And if I had had a large flock I am sure they would have been impossible to tell apart. No one else in the family could tell one from the other. But I spent enough time with them to know that both Rosie (pictured above) and Sweet Pea had dark heads, while Sweet Pea was the only one with no white in her tail feathers. And only Daisy had a feather on her neck with a black streak in it. The differences were subtle, like telling identical twins apart.

I first realized that I was becoming attached to these birds last fall. I was racing the clock to get some plants moved before bad weather set in. Since I was in the garden and could watch them, the girls were out of their run. Every time I stuck a shovel in the ground, they came running, jumped in the hole and started pecking around. They had figured out, that when I dug up soil, I also uncovered worms, grubs, and other delicious treats. I should have confined them, but just like when my kids were toddlers, helping me in the garden, the thrill of being with them was more important than quickly finishing my task.

All this goes to say, these four birds quickly became pets to me. I was just as attached to them as I am to our two cats. Maybe more so, after all my cats never help with the weeding. While the cats do catch the occasional mouse, they don't eat slugs or other garden pests. Not to mention, chicken droppings make wonderful fertilizer, while the stuff left in the cat box has to go to the landfill. Since I had only hens, they made less noise than a dog, and never a sound after dark. And the best part of all, they gave me eggs for breakfast.

I can see how a large flock would be considered livestock, but I think it is different when you only keep a few birds. And why have we elevated cats and dogs above other domesticated animals? So I am wondering,

how do others feel about these issues? How many of you, have become attached to an animal that is considered "livestock"?

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