

Bantam rooster reveals unexpected side of personality

By William Crain

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Burdock, a Bantam Rooster, demonstrated that the wildest, most freedom-loving individual is also capable of devotion and caring.

Photo by Ellen Crain

My wife, Ellen, and I founded Safe Haven Farm Sanctuary to provide a home for farm animals rescued from slaughter, neglect and abuse. In the process of caring for the animals, we have learned many new things about them. One animal in particular — our little Bantam rooster — taught us there can be much more to an animal's personality than first meets the eye.

We adopted this rooster six years ago, when we received a phone call from the director of the Beekman Recreation

Department. She said a petting zoo had brought several animals to the town's community day, but when the event ended, the zoo's workers couldn't catch their Bantam rooster. So they left him

in the parking lot. The director was worried because there were coyotes and other predators in the area. She also was concerned about the danger posed by cars. She wondered if we could capture the rooster and give him a home.

Our two caretakers, a young woman and man, were eager to try. When they arrived at the parking lot, they saw the little rooster, a colorful fellow who was only about half the size of a typical hen. They soon discovered that he also was a fast runner and a good flyer — and extremely difficult to catch. Whenever they thought they had him cornered, he escaped their grasp. Finally, after two hours, he ran into a hollow log in the nearby woods, and they were able to grab hold of him.

The caretakers immediately named him Burdock, a name which they thought fit his handsome appearance. Then we all discussed where to house him. The obvious place was our large aviary, but Burdock was so wild we guessed he would go berserk if he was confined in any way. So we

let him roam the pastures. He wandered here and there, climbing on fences and roofs, and crowing whenever the mood struck him. If another rooster tried to push Burdock aside, he always fought back, even when the other rooster was three times his size.

We were happy to see that Burdock wanted to sleep inside the barn, where he was at least safe from weasels, coyotes and other predators who generally hunt at night. Burdock roosted on the highest rafters.

Then, after a few months, Burdock suddenly stopped his daytime roaming. The change occurred when we adopted Sweetie, an elderly hen who had been found in a vacant lot in Brooklyn.

Sweetie had a severe limp, but our vet said there was no remedy for it. The vet explained that Sweetie had all the signs of a hen who had been raised for meat on a factory farm. These hens are bred to gain so much weight their legs have trouble supporting them, and their legs frequently give out. Soon, Sweetie couldn't walk at all. Every morning we carried her from her indoor cubby to the grass in the aviary so she could enjoy the sun and breezes.

To our surprise, Burdock began spending his daytime hours quietly sitting near her, just outside the aviary fence. Then one day, when we opened the aviary door to go in, Burdock walked inside and sat down next to her. After that, Burdock rarely left Sweetie's side. Scientists warn about attributing human motives and feelings to animals, but it seemed like he offered this hen his companionship.

A few weeks later, Sweetie passed away. After that, Burdock paid more attention to the other hens in the aviary. Burdock developed a special relationship with Katie, a hen I described in the Dec. 28, 2014, My Valley section. Katie was a remarkably caring hen, and in the last hours of her life all the residents of the aviary stayed next to her. Burdock stayed closest of all, and when she died Burdock rose high in the air, vigorously flapped his wings, and let out a piercing rooster's crow. It sounded as if he was announcing to the heavens that someone special was gone.

Over time, we have increasingly given the chickens in the aviary opportunities to leave it in order to forage in the adjacent pasture. But when afternoon turns to dusk, Burdock is inside the aviary, calling out to the hens to come back in. He wants everyone to be safe for the night.

Burdock showed us that an animal's personality can be more complex than it initially appears. He demonstrated that the wildest, most freedom-loving individual is also capable of devotion and caring.

William Crain is co-founder of Safe Haven Farm Sanctuary in Poughquag. Readers can learn more about the sanctuary from his most recent book, "The Emotional Lives of Animals and Children: Insights from a Farm Sanctuary." Also visit www.safehavenfarmsanctuary.org