

## Do You Speak 'Took'?

When observing chickens as they go about their daily activities one might assume the gentle noises they make are simply mindless utterances that simply go along with being a chicken. Oh contraire...

Back in 2006, Australian scientists – Chris and Linda Evans, undertook a study that seems to indicate that chickens do indeed possess a form of language, identified by the scientists as "Took". As a result of the Evans' study, over 20 different calls or sounds were identified that indicate very specific bits of information.

A hen or rooster will make the sound – "tuk, tuk, tuk" to announce to others in the flock that food is present. A few interesting things about this call have been discovered. When chickens come across food, and make this "tuk, tuk, tuk" sound, other birds in the flock react *only* if they don't already know that food is around. It was also found that slight variations of the "tuk, tuk, tuk" were made depending on the *kind* of food that was present. As an aside, it has also been shown that roosters will make the "There's food over here" call to lure hens within easy reach so that they might score an opportunity to "have their way" with them.

The language of chickens, or 'Took', begins very early in life – even before a chick hatches from the egg. Mother hens communicate with their chicks and vice versa. Hens will croon or "purr" softly and chicks within the eggs will reciprocate, making small 'cheeps' to which the mother reacts. A day or so before hatching she can hear the type of 'cheeping' which tells her that her eggs are about to hatch.

There are in fact numerous different calls that are used to communicate a whole range of information important to a chicken's way of life - even pertinent to their survival. Roosters crow to publicize their territorial boundaries and assess other males. . Among the many types of calls that have been identified are: nesting calls, egg laying, mating, distress, fear, threat and alarm calls, submissive and contentment calls, food calls, and warning calls.

Warning or alarm calls are also very specific as to the presence or approach of ground or aerial predators. These calls are immediately identified by other flock members who take appropriate action by standing up alert, crouching or taking cover. Roosters are more vigilant in giving out alarm calls when there are hens nearby. In fact, if there are no other chickens nearby to warn, a warning cry will not be given because there is no one present to benefit from the call. When women getting together are referred to a bunch of "Hens", this really is a misnomer because chickens speak their language of 'Took' with great purposefulness and aren't prone to gather about simply to "gossip".

Chickens also communicate in other ways by postures and visual displays. Unlike humans, birds are able to control their irises, enlarging and shrinking their pupils rapidly. This display is called "flashing" or "pinning" and birds may do this when they are excited, greatly interested in something, or when they are angry, frightened, or aggressive. For a human to be able to identify the particular context in which the eye pinning is being displayed careful observation of the chicken's immediate environment and body posture can give clues. Anyone who spends time with their chickens is well aware of being "nailed" in a purposeful gaze by one or more individuals in the flock.

Below is a brief list of some of the more common expressions of "Took" and their general meaning:

- ◆ **"tuk, tuk, tuk"** announces to other chickens, the presence of food
- ◆ **"Baaaaak-baaak-baaak-bak-bak-bak"** means "Hi there. I'm happy to see you. What's up? Got anything good for me to eat?"
- ◆ **"Bak-bak-bak-BAGOK!"** "Wow! I just laid an egg! I'm pretty proud about that, but I just want to let others around know they should keep a look out for predators. (And frankly, my bottom hurts!)"
- ◆ **"Murrrr, murrrr, murrrr"** means life is great and all is well with the world.
- ◆ **"Awrrrrr!"** This is a growl that says, "Stay away! This is MY nest and you'll keep back if you know what's good for you!"
- ◆ **"GAGOK, GOK, GOK!"** "Help! I'm really scared! What the heck just happened???"

There are also some non-verbal postures with which chickens communicate. Roosters will perform a "Rooster Dance" where they circle and lean in towards another rooster (or human intruder), dragging the leading wing's pinion feathers on the ground. This is a dominance display that will often precede an attack, so if this dance is directed toward you, it's best to assert your own dominance and respond in a way that let's the rooster know you will not be bullied.

Hens will often crouch before a rooster or their caretaker in a submissive posture. This often means they are willing to mate (but in your case a friendly pet will do). Following mating or getting that pet from you, you will notice the hen will ruffle her feathers and shake similar to how a wet dog shakes to expel water from his coat. Chickens and other birds engage in this behavior as a way to release tension.

Chickens and other birds will also fluff their feathers to help hold in heat in cold weather. Fluffing the feathers is also another way chickens can make themselves appear larger or more threatening. If a hen on her nest is fluffing her feathers (especially if accompanied by 'growling') you'd better keep back! If the weather is otherwise nice and you observe one of your chickens standing about with ruffled feathers, this can be a sign of illness, so check her out!