

What Chickens Want

By Kerrin Buckler - CALU

Free range and organic broiler production are currently experiencing something of a boom. Celebrity chefs and high profile publicity campaigns are playing a big part in this. Increasingly, consumers are looking for what they believe are animals reared with high welfare standards and more “natural” husbandry methods.

Consumers rely on labelling to inform their choices, and they believe that “free range” is the same as “high welfare”. This is not necessarily the case. To be classed as ‘free-range’, birds must have access to outdoor areas during daylight hours, but there is no guarantee that they will actually go out of doors. For instance, one study of commercial free range units found less than 14% of the flock venturing outdoors at any one time.

There are likely to be various reasons why the birds are not going out. One of these might be that the habitat is simply not appealing to the birds. This is something that researchers are now starting to consider: that it isn’t enough to just provide some outdoor space, consideration also needs to be given to the type of habitat the birds have.

This is exactly what a recent study at CALU’s base, Bangor University’s Henfaes Research Centre, has looked at. Broiler chickens were provided with a variety of different habitats, some with no trees, others in woodland, and some with a mixture of open space and woodland.

Andrew Pickup, the Project Researcher said, “Including trees in the outdoor area is particularly promising when you consider that domestic chickens were all originally bred from the wild jungle fowl found in forests of India and south-east Asia. If chickens have access to an area closer to their natural habitat, rather than an exposed open field, they might make better use of it, remaining more active and therefore avoiding major welfare problems.”

The study compared the behaviour of broiler chickens in the different environments. Andrew found that the chickens did, on average, spend more time outdoors when they had access to woodland rather than an open field with no trees. He concludes, “There is potential, therefore, to market ‘woodland reared’ poultry as a genuinely high welfare product and possibly achieve price premiums as a result”.