

Colored Chicks Raise Concerns But, After Easter, Many Face Fates Worse Than Dye

By *Anna Sanders*
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Chicks are sometimes dyed vibrant colors for Easter presents. The dye is administered through spraying. Other times, the nontoxic food coloring is inserted directly into the embryo. (Source: Screenshot via [YouTube](#) ^[1])

It happens every Easter Sunday: Cuddled next to the chocolate bunnies, egg-shaped jelly beans, and green plastic grass in their basket of goodies, many children will find live, fluffy — and sometimes colored — baby chicks. While lawmakers in Florida recently repealed a ban on the controversial practice of dyeing these little critters vibrant colors, it is what happens after Easter, when the chicks' novelty wears off, that most concerns animal rights groups.

“Unfortunately around Easter time we see an increase in people giving chicks and big bunnies in particular as pets. All too many of them end up not staying in those homes,” explains Inga Fricke, director of sheltering and pet care issues at The Humane Society of the United States. Unlike bunnies, however, the chicks grow into hens or roosters, and their appeal fades fast.

“They’re bought as novelties,” Stephen Zawistowski, science advisor for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, gruffly explains.

Pets, Zawistowski says, should be thought of as companions. But, when these chicks are dyed purple or pink, Fricke adds, they seem less like real commitments.

“Anything that encourages people to take an animal into their home without thinking of the long term affects is going to have a negative impact on the animals,” Fricke adds.

Though it’s unclear why, state lawmakers in Florida barred the artificial dyeing or coloring of “any rabbit or fowl” 45 years ago. The ban went so far as to prohibit any person from bringing colored rabbits or fowl into the state. But in February, the state house repealed ^[2] the law ^[3], with the senate following closely behind ^[4]. The old law also banned the sale of fowl less than 4 weeks and rabbits less than 2 months for use as pets or toys, dyed or not. If Governor Rick Scott signs the repeal ^[5], rabbits and fowl can not only be dyed, but young bunnies and fowl can be bought statewide as pets.

Both Fricke and Zawistowski question one of the dyeing techniques that would be allowed by the state July 1, should the governor sign the repeal. While some chicks are sprayed with food coloring — safe enough by all accounts, though it could possibly cause the birds stress — vendors sometimes insert the dye directly into the embryo.

“The greater risk is when you drill that small hole in the egg,” explains Zawistowski. “You’re potentially introducing bacteria or injuring the embryo. There’s a reason the egg has a shell and tissue.”

Former poultry rancher Peter Theer disagrees. Before retiring the ranch in 2008, Theer dyed chick embryos to sell as Easter chicks for a few years. He notes the dye is non-toxic and explains after the chicks molt, the color is gone.

“I make real sure that people understand the color will not last,” he says. Even so, some customers returned the chicks to him as chickens — and that’s animal rights groups are afraid of, he says.

“The PETA people are against colored chicks. They’re afraid people will get sick of them [when they grow up] and throw them away,” Theer explains.

Zawistowski and Fricke — not necessarily “PETA people,” but close enough — don’t just think abandonments occur, they know. Zawistowski estimates thousands of chicks are adopted each Easter and Fricke says that, though the Humane Society doesn’t have specific numbers, the organization hears from shelters nationwide that see an increase in chicks, ducklings, and rabbits around Easter time.

A few years ago, Zawistowski even took in ducklings on his own after a neighbor told him a restaurant was giving them to all children who came in for Easter dinner. He alerted the ASPCA and adopted a few of the creatures. But Zawistowski’s ducks are the exception.

“When they get too big, people dump them in the park,” Zawistowski says. There, the chicks and even ducklings are victims of predation and they have a hard time finding food. “The bread people feed them doesn’t provide enough nutrition,” he adds.

But Zawistowski says that most chicks probably don’t end



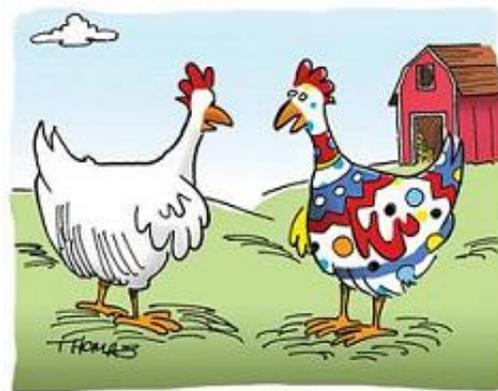
(Source: Screenshot via [YouTube](#) ^[6])

up in parks.

“The more tragic thing is that most of these chicks don’t last long enough to be discarded,” he says. When properly cared for, the chicks will be in an incubator or with a hen sitting on them.

“I imagine most people with these chicks put them in a shoebox with holes and shove them under the bed at night,” Zawistowski explains.

Nancy Smith, owner and operator of the Cackle Hatchery, explains in an email that many of those who buy chicks for their children around Easter will give them to relatives or friends once the chicks “outgrow their boxes in the house.” (Cartoon: *Reader's Digest* [7])



“I was an Easter egg.”

Theer, the former rancher, says that many of his customers, if they didn’t return the chicks to him, ate them.

“We colored meat birds — it’s easier” Theer says. “When they grow up you can just pull off the feathers and stick them in the freezer.” When customers did return grown-up chickens, he and his wife “just ate them ourselves.”

But neither Zawistowski nor Fricke were eager to advocate this as a solution.

“We think that if you’re getting this creature as a companion, you should treat it as a companion,” Zawistowski explains of the ASPCA.

Megan Pace from Cackleberry Coop says she takes “very seriously” selling live birds and chicks.

“I would not consider giving them away as a ‘door prize’ or anything in that spirit. Chicks are baby chickens who grow up to be large birds and the people who buy from me are looking for chickens to take into their lives for egg production, bug control, pets, etc. They are prepared for the responsibility,” Pace says in an email.

While hatcheries selling Easter chicks directly to customers is a problem that chicken farmers like Pace can solve, Zawistowski notes that control can be difficult. Many hatcheries selling chickens have a purchase minimum of 10 or 15 chicks, but most Easter chicks are sold on the street from vendors who purchase these large quantities from hatcheries like Cackleberry Coop that couldn’t possibly know what will happen to them, he says. And the problem is only complicated with an increase in the urban chicken [8] movement.

“They have them for their own eggs, so the chicks are shipped in the mail,” Zawistowski says. Online availability of chicks allows vendors easy-access, he says.

Both he and Fricke would have any potential Easter chick customers weigh the costs this Sunday.

“We would love people to think about getting those little marshmallowy chicks,” Zawistowski says.

Above, a video of dyed Easter chicks in a pet store in Arizona, taken by someone who believes the chicks are the “cutest ever.” Dyeing chicks and selling them is illegal in about half the states, according to *The New York Times* [9]. (Source: YouTube [10])

If you would like to adopt a rescued chick, please call PETA [11], ASPCA [12], or the Humane Society of the United States [13] for information or contact Farm Sanctuary [14].

Animals Birds Holiday/Seasons Kids/Family Policy

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- [1] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3sfUakyaoU&feature=related>
- [2] <http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2012/1197/Amendment/303390/HTML>
- [3] <http://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2011/828.161>
- [4] <http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2012/1197>
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- [10] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ErdqeOvjL0>
- [11] <http://www.peta.org/about/contact-peta/default.aspx>

[12] <http://www.asPCA.org/adoption/>

[13] <http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/>

[14] <http://www.farmsanctuary.org/rescue/adoption.html>