

Lucky clover – and lucky chickens

“What is so lucky about four-leaf clover?” That was one of the questions posed by reader Res. Reader Res again wants to remain anonymous. So, we will call him Rolf again, with the supplement: “Real name known by Askforce.”

“What is so lucky about four-leaf clover?”: asks Rolf* (*real name known by Askforce). The answer is simple: four-leaf clover is actually the unluckiest clover of them all. Just think about what happens to it. If the normally three-leaf herb – Trifolium in Latin – grows a fourth leaf, it will be plucked from the roadside, pressed in some nondescript poetry book and then – worst-case scenario – dried and enclosed with a rambling love letter. For our younger readers: a love letter is a type of racy communication that doesn't involve an app. So, the luck of the four-leaf clover is very short-lived, unless it has the (mis)fortune to be in the middle of a meadow where no one sees it.

There is not much more to say on the subject, dear Rolf. Just that the luck of the four-leaf clover belongs solely to whoever finds the herb, never to the clover itself. And more generally: luck always comes at the expense of something else.

Luck is not the exclusive preserve of clover. The animal kingdom also has its fortunate members. Working on the assumption that “success = luck”, the domestic chicken is the luckiest of all creatures: nowhere in the history of evolution has there been an animal with such powerful reproductive capacity – or such a secure start in life. The hatchlings, numbering about 20,000, are protected by wire mesh while being fattened for slaughter. The nasty fox can't get near them, and has to make do with the goose instead. There are 45 billion of these well-fed and well-protected broilers worldwide, and it only takes them 35 days to reach the right weight for slaughter; as for those relatively rare and unfortunate chickens that have to try their luck out in the big wide world, they face a struggle for survival of five to seven years.

Day 35 is when it all comes to a head for the 'lucky' chicken: it is suspended upside down and stunned in an electrical water bath, cut open, bled dry, plucked and disembowelled. One consequence of this clinical end is – per year of birth – the 2.25 or more trillion foregone years of life. That makes it all the more amazing that there are always enough chickens.

The jackpot would have to be when a young broiler turns 35 days old and promptly finds a four-leaf clover. That really would be a new bird over the right whiff of clover.