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# AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION of The Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, Ala.

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## CANNIBALISM AMONG CHICKENS

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Of the several forms of cannibalism among chickens, some of the most common are toe picking, egg eating, feather eating, body picking, and a condition known as prolapse of the oviduct, or pick-out.

### Crowded Conditions Main Cause

A summary of the different causes of cannibalism shows that the major factor is crowded housing conditions. Practically every case of the habit can be directly or indirectly traced to this one cause. Over-crowding the brooder house is one of the first mistakes usually made. Therefore, every effort should be made to prevent cannibalistic habits from getting started by providing sufficient space in the brooder house. Each chick should have at least one-half square foot of floor space in the brooder house. Placing too many chicks under one brooder is another common mistake. Not more than 400 chicks should be brooded in one unit under one brooder stove, regardless of the size of the brooder or room. Even when these principles are adhered to, the growing chicks must have more room after they reach the age of about 8 weeks. At this time the cockerels often can be removed to allow more space for the young pullets. During the remainder of the growing season, the pullets should have ample roosting space and, if possible, unlimited range. Depending on size, each pullet requires from 6 to 10 inches of space on the roosting pole. One acre or more of range should be provided for each 100 pullets.

When transferred to laying quarters, each pullet will need the following: from 3 to 4 square feet of floor space, 8 to 10 inches of space on the roosting poles, and 3 inches of hopper feeding space. One roomy dark nest should be provided for each eight hens.

### Importance of Keeping Birds Busy

After being reared on a range, pullets are usually idle, restless, and easily irritated when partially confined to a laying house. Therefore, any device or practice that will keep them interested and busy will be helpful. Feeding green feed in small quantities several times during the day is a good practice. Dust baths, although not usually recommended, will keep the birds busy for a while. Such other practices as feeding semi-solid buttermilk on boards near the floor, feeding moist mash, or scattering grain in the litter on the floor will help divert the birds from cannibalistic tendencies.

### Dark Nests Helpful

When pullets come into production, or after hens have come back into production following a molt, the cloacal parts in the vent become flexible for a few days, thus permitting the tender red cloacal membranes to protrude from the vent immediately after the egg is laid. When a bird leaves the nest with this red membrane exposed, she immediately becomes the center of attraction. The entire flock persistently picks at the exposed cloaca until the intestinal tract is stripped out. In some cases the intestine is not destroyed, but the laceration is so severe that the bird dies. Well-darkened nests encourage hens to remain on the nests for a longer period of time after laying; thus they are helpful in preventing pick-outs. Tacking burlap curtains over the front of the nests is an easy way to make them secluded and dark. Pullets usually stand on the entrance platform and await their turn to lay. To prevent these birds picking the pullet that has just laid, the platform or runway may be removed from the lower tier of nests. Nests should be constructed well in advance of the time pullets are expected to start laying. The birds should be encouraged to lay in the nest rather than on the floor or ground, since the latter practice encourages cannibalism.

### Feeding and Cannibalism

Accumulation of hard fat in the abdomen tends to cause the cloaca to become flexible and protrude from the vent. A grain ration with a variety of grains and mash, rather than an all-corn ration, will keep the fowls in good condition and reduce this tendency. In some cases cannibalism is promoted by irregular feeding and a mineral-deficient diet. Mash should be kept before the birds continually, with plenty of hopper space provided; also, unlimited amounts of oyster shell and sand should be available at all times.

Prolapse is often caused by constipation. To relieve this condition, Epsom salts may be fed at the rate of one pound per 100 mature birds, or one-half to three-fourths of a pound per 100 growing birds once every month, or as needed.

The feeding of whole oats is often helpful in controlling cannibalism. Addition of meat products to the mash or the feeding of fresh meat scraps is usually of no value in stopping this habit.

Extra amounts of common salt fed to chickens showing cannibalistic habits has been found to often check the trouble. The common recommendation is to add 1 tablespoonful of salt to each gallon of water consumed during the forenoon for 3 days and repeat this treatment a few days later if necessary. Sprinkling a little salt on top of the mash several times daily for 3 days also has been found effective in stopping an outbreak.

When feed hoppers are elevated about 12 to 18 inches above the floor, birds standing on the floor are inclined to pick the vents of the birds eating the mash. The hoppers may be raised far enough above the floor to eliminate this temptation, or the feeders should be placed directly on the floor.

### Dark Houses Effective

One of the best methods of controlling cannibalism, especially in young chicks, is to darken the entire house to such an extent that the birds can see only to get around and eat. Window curtains of a medium dark colored material may be used for this purpose. Care must be taken, however, that the house is well ventilated as a warm stuffy house encourages cannibalism.

### Anti-Pick Devices

Several types of devices for preventing cannibalism are on the market. Each is usually effective and may be attached to pullets when they are housed for winter, or to old hens at time of molt, without affecting egg production. Some of these devices are attached to the beak so that the birds cannot pick one another; however, there is no interference with eating. Other devices act as glasses, preventing one bird from seeing blood or wounds on another. There are also metal shields which attach to the tail head of the bird and protect the vent and a device for cutting the tip of the upper beak. All are considered satisfactory, but should be used only as a last resort. Tar or commercial paints may be applied to the wounds of picked birds to prevent other birds from killing them. However, these products are of only temporary value.

### Prevention Easier Than Cure

Regardless of what methods are used to prevent cannibalism, once the habit is established, it is difficult to control. Since over-crowding is the major cause, every effort should be made to prevent cannibalism from making its appearance by providing adequate space at all times. There are always numerous signs of trouble far in advance of actual mortality. Restlessness, feather eating, feather picking, and bare backs are some of the signs to be watched for. When these signs appear, crowded conditions should be relieved at once.

