

2-1953

Debeaking Poultry to Control Cannibalism and Featherpicking

Boyd Bonzer

Glen Hart

Follow this and additional works at: http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_circ

 Part of the [Agriculture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bonzer, Boyd and Hart, Glen, "Debeaking Poultry to Control Cannibalism and Featherpicking" (1953). *SDSU Extension Circulars*. 568.

http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_circ/568

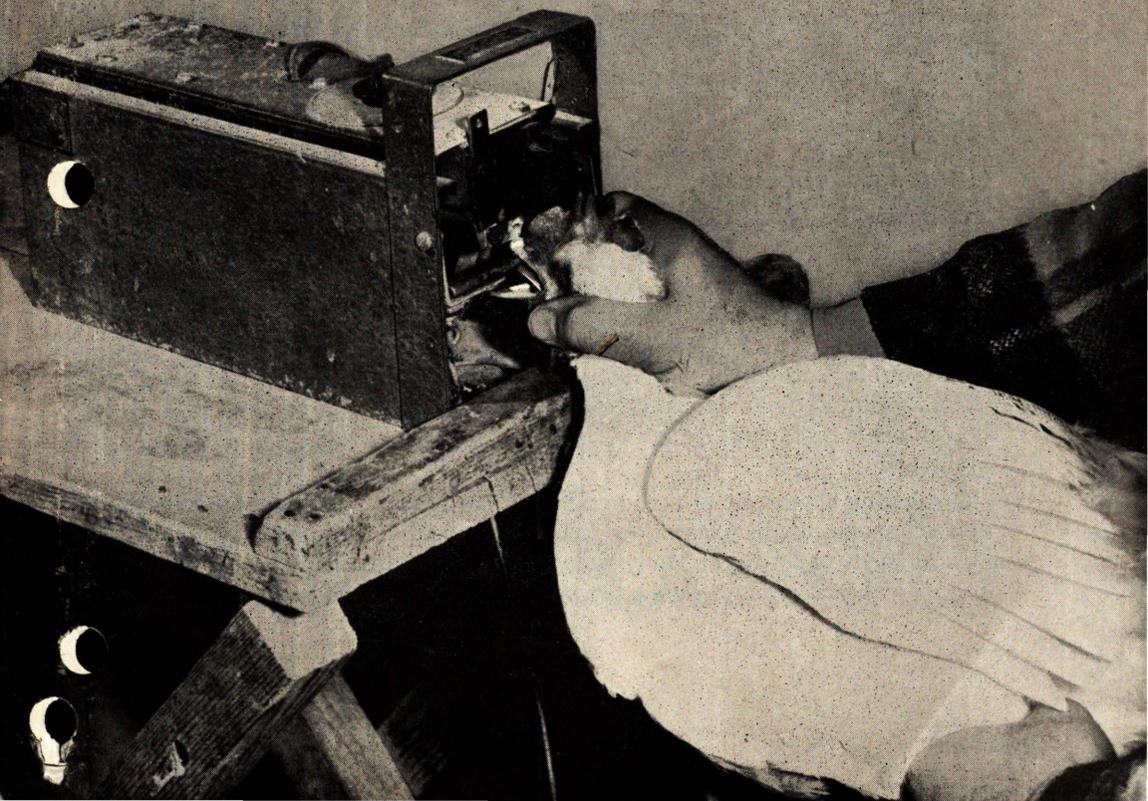
This Circular is brought to you for free and open access by the SDSU Extension at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in SDSU Extension Circulars by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

VISION CIRCULAR 490 FEBRUARY 1953

DEBEAKING POULTRY

*To Control Cannibalism
And Featherpicking*

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE COLLEGE
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
College Station, South Dakota



Debeaking Poultry

To Control Cannibalism and Feather Picking

By **BOYD BONZER** and **GLEN HART**
Extension Poultrymen, SDSC

What Is Debeaking?

Debeaking is the practice of taking off part of the upper beak of a bird. This removes the part they pinch and tear flesh with, making it extremely difficult for them to be cannibalistic. The process can be accomplished with an electric debeaker, using a hot blade that cauterizes the wound as it cuts, preventing excessive bleeding.

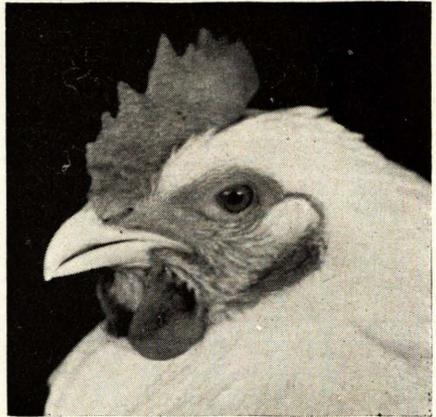
Why Debeak?

Because it is the most positive insurance against cannibalism. Cannibalism, when not checked immediately after it was discovered, has cost many poultrymen as much as one fourth of their flock. In many flocks it accounts for more mortality than any other single factor.

When To Debeak.

Birds may be debeaked at any age. Flock owners who normally have trouble with picking in the brooder house should debeak their birds when they are one day old. Folks who do not have trouble until birds are housed, probably should delay debeaking until they transfer birds from range to laying house.

Debeaking should be done immediately when cannibalism is noticed in a flock of birds of any age. Many times an outbreak will occur when a laying



This is a normal bird. Note the sharp beak that she uses for pinching and tearing flesh when she is cannibalistic.

flock is in heavy production. Debeaking can be done at this time without retarding production if extreme caution is practiced while handling the birds. The physical handling will hurt them more than the debeaking.

Is Debeaking Harmful?

Debeaking is not considered harmful to a flock of birds. It is standard practice on many farms and it need not reduce egg production. At South Dakota State College Poultry Department all pullets are debeaked when they are housed.

All feed for debeaked birds should be placed in feeders. They will be able to pick grain off the floor if they have to, but not as efficiently as before.



Debeaked Correctly
½ to ⅔ of beak removed



Not enough
Beak has grown out



Too Much
More removed than necessary

Lower Beak Too Long
Searing the tip of the lower beak may retard excessive growth



How To Debeak

The operator holds the bird's head in his right hand with his thumb and forefinger holding the beak open. He lays the upper beak on the bar or flat surface of the debeaker. Bringing down the hot blade cuts off the desired amount of beak. The stump of the beak should be seared by rubbing against the hot blade. Sear only long enough to stop most of the bleeding. Caution should be taken not to burn the bird's tongue. However, birds usually will keep the tongue out of the way. The lower beak may continue to grow on certain birds because it does not wear down normally. This will usually break off when it gets in the way. If not, it can be clipped with a pair of scissors or side cutters. It has been reported that searing the end of the lower beak

slightly will prevent excessive growth.

With electricity, baby chicks can be debeaked by holding the upper beak against the hot knife on the debeaker. Chick debeakers, also, are available.

Debeaking Without Electricity

Birds can be debeaked without electricity by merely cutting off part of the upper beak. There will be a small flow of blood unless heat is applied to sear over the wound. A soldering iron will work. Baby chicks can be debeaked with finger nail clippers. When older birds are debeaked, the beak is harder and subject to splitting. The sides of the upper beak can be cut with a jack knife or side-cutters at the desired location. The end section is then forced up until it breaks.



Debeaking outside in day light. Note holding coop and debeaker mounted on stand.

Equipment Needed

When handled, birds should be disturbed as little as possible. This means a temporary partition in the house and catching coops for holding the birds. A roll of poultry netting or wire hurdle can be used to herd the birds into the catching coops. An electric debeaker may be mounted on a barrel or stand at convenient working height with enough drop cord to reach an electric outlet.

Many folk prefer debeaking at night after the birds are on the roosts. They use just enough light to see to debeak. A roll of wire or poultry net is all the additional equipment needed to keep the birds from mixing in the dark house. After the debeaking is completed they turn on the lights and let the birds get back on the roost.

Management Factors That Encourage Cannibalism

At one time poultrymen thought cannibalism was caused mostly by nutritional deficiencies. Today it is felt that management practices are more often the cause of an outbreak. Cannibalism usually starts with a very few birds in the flock and, if not controlled, immediately will become a vice that will spread through the entire flock in a matter of a few days or even a few hours. One or a combination of factors may be the initial cause.

Crowding

If baby chicks are confined to the delivery box too long or are crowded in a small area they will pick each others' toes and combs. They should have at least one-half square foot of floor space per chick in the brooder house until they are six weeks of age. Pullets on range are tempted to pick if they are crowded in the shelter for any length of time during the day. Newly-housed pullets often start picking when the laying house is over-crowded.

Feeder and Water Space

When feed and water space is inadequate or empty the birds become rest-

less and are tempted to pick at each other. Allow at least one inch of feeder space per chick for baby chicks. Two to two and one-half inches per chick, from four to twelve weeks of age. From twelve weeks on, provide four inches of feeder space per bird. Baby chicks should be started the first week to ten days with two-to-three quart water fountains per hundred. After that, larger fountains or automatic fountains should be installed to save labor. Fresh clean water should be available to the birds at all times.

Overheating

A hot, stuffy brooder house or laying house will tend to make the birds irritable and may cause picking to start. A cool, ventilated brooder house will add to the comfort of the birds and also promote feather growth. Adequate ventilation is especially important when new pullets are put in the house from the range. A hot stuffy house seems to make them irritable and often causes picking to start.



A poultry (or fish) net for corralling birds. It is all the holding equipment necessary for night debeaking.

Idleness

Chicks that aren't busy are tempted to get in trouble. Provide plenty of litter in the house and green feed (such as alfalfa hay) to pick at if the birds have a lot of leisure time. If they have something other than each other to pick at they probably will not start cannibalism.

Nutritional Deficiencies

A shortage in the diet may lead to an abnormal appetite and cannibalism. Chickens that are fed a balanced ration are not subject to nutritional deficiencies.

Other Causes Of Cannibalism

Prolapse of the Oviduct— (Blowout)

A weakness in some pullets, when coming into production, may cause the oviduct to protrude from their vents. Birds affected in this manner may be picked and killed by other birds in the flock if they are not removed immediately. These birds are called "pick-outs."

Once a flock starts picking vents, certain birds will wait at the nest for a bird to lay and pick the section of the oviduct that protrudes while the bird is laying. The affected bird starts to

bleed; then, the bloodthirsty flock will pick her until she is dead. Birds affected with prolapse of the oviduct should be removed from the flock and slaughtered for meat or killed and disposed of as soon as they are discovered. Birds showing prolapse are seldom profitable producers, even though they may recover.

Feather Picking

Many times we hear a poultryman say that his cockerels just won't grow tails. This problem usually can be traced to the brooder house where the young birds were picking the feathers

out of the tail as fast as they could start to grow.

Maybe the whole thing started from a bird getting the taste of a broken feather or picking at pin feathers of a

slow feathering bird. At any rate, once the birds get a little "deeper" than the feathers with their picking they will draw blood and be off on a cannibalism outbreak.

Other Measures To Prevent Cannibalism

There are some preventive measures that have been practiced for years when an outbreak of cannibalism would start in a flock. Some of these practices are a lot of work and most of them offer only temporary relief from the problem.

Red Light or Windows Painted Red

Dim the house so the birds have only enough light to see to eat. The windows can be painted with red paint, or a red bulb can supply the light and the windows can be covered with cardboard. A dim red light will make everything look red. Consequently the birds can not distinguish bloody areas from other areas of the body.

Red Anti-pick Ointment

A red salve or ointment can be applied to about 25% of the birds in the flock. Spread it on the areas where the birds have picked. Also put patches of it on birds that have not been picked. Bloodthirsty birds will pick at this because of its color but will soon stop

when they notice its bitter taste.

Anti-pick ointment can be purchased at most hatcheries and feed stores.

Milk Products or Green Feed

A condensed milk or whey product, green alfalfa or clover hay will give the birds something to pick at and keep them busy. This also may cut down some on the mash intake, because these feeds have high nutritive value. The hay should be early-cut, leafy and green, and may be fed in a rack; or a bale may be opened on the floor of the house.

Anti-pick Devices

Several devices are on the market that limit the bird's vision or project beyond the tip of the beak.

These gadgets may reduce picking troubles. They also may result in birds getting caught or hung on poultry house equipment. Many poultrymen have discontinued the use of these devices since debeaking has become popular.

Some Preventive Practices That May Be Harmful To The Birds

Hang a Catalogue or Magazine

Some poultrymen have found that hanging a supply of paper high enough so the birds have to reach for it will keep them busy and out of mischief. In some cases the birds may eat too much of the paper and have digestive disturbances.

Salt in the Water

Salt added to the water has been used. This can result in the birds drink-

ing too much water and keeping the litter wet or they may not drink the water at all.

Hang a Jack Rabbit in the House

Hanging raw meat in the poultry house is a bad practice although it has been done. The meat can spoil before it is all consumed and cause trouble. It also will tend to whet the bird's appetite for blood and flesh.

Cannibalism and Feather Picking in Turkeys

Cannibalism and feather picking can be costly to the turkey grower. Picking vents or other parts of the body can cause a high mortality among poults. Feather picking, alone, may not cause mortality but it will lower

ment permanently discolors the skin, resulting in a lower grade carcass.

Vent picking or toe picking may occur during the first 10 days. This type of picking usually is caused by crowding or having the room too warm. The birds should be debeaked during this period if picking starts but it will be better to delay the job until a little later, if possible.

Many folks feel that sometime between two and four weeks of age is the best time to debeak. By this time the birds will have learned to eat and drink and are adjusted to their surroundings.

They are easy to handle at this age. They are about one good handful and can be held with a minimum of struggling. It is best to debeak at an early age and prevent feather pulling before it starts. Between ten and twelve weeks seems to be the critical period for feather picking in many flocks. Much damage already is done by the time



$\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the upper beak should be removed.

the market value of the finished birds of the dark feathered varieties. "Blue Back" or a large, dark area over the back or tail of a bird is caused by the dark pigment from broken feathers spreading through the skin. The pig-

the flockowner notices that picking has started.

How to Debeak Turkeys

Turkeys are debeaked the same as chickens. Lay the upper beak over the bar of an electric debeaker and remove about one-half of the upper beak.

Feeding and Management

Feed both mash and grain in hoppers so they will be sure to get as much as they need for fast and efficient growth. This is probably more important with turkeys than with chickens because rapid growth and an early market age are of utmost importance to the turkey grower.

What About Wing Notching and Wing Clipping?

Wing notching is cutting the tendon of one wing at the outer joint with the hot blade of a debeaker when the poults are about ten days old.

Wing clipping is cutting off the end of one wing just outside of the last joint when the poults are very young. Bleeding is not serious when day old poults are clipped.

Buyers prefer that clipping be done on the right wing only. This permits putting up a more attractive pack of dressed birds. Notching or cutting one wing will throw the bird off balance when they try to fly, thus keeping them closer to the ground and inside regular range fences.

South Dakota turkey growers have not used this practice as much as those in some other areas. Some criticisms of the practice are that a few primary feathers usually grow out of the stub when the wings are clipped. These will give the bird enough balance so they can do some flying. Wing notching keeps them close to the ground but may result in bruises on the heavier birds if they fly off high perches.

Birds can be grounded where it is necessary by the old reliable method—clipping primary and secondary feathers of one wing with a pair of tin snips or heavy shears.

Agricultural Extension Service

Published and distributed under Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914, by the Agricultural Extension Service, South Dakota State College, College Station, George I. Gilbertson, Director, U. S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating.