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Culling The Egg Production Flock

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Culling
The Egg Production Flock

“She’s A Layer”
Large, Red, Waxy, Full
Bleached or Bleaching
Bright and Prominent
Neat and Refined

“She’s A Loafer”
COMB
BEAK
EYE
HEAD

Pale, Scaly, Shrunken
Yellow or Growing Yellow
Dull and Sunken
Snaky and Narrow

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE COLLEGE
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE
U. S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE COOPERATING
Culling

The Egg Production Flock

By Boyd J. Bonzer, Extension Poultryman, and
Lloyd Shinnick, Assistant Extension Poultryman

Every pullet housed in the fall represents a sizeable investment that must be recovered from the eggs she lays because her meat value is usually only a third to a half of what it costs to raise her.

With this in mind most flocks should receive little culling through the fall and winter months. A rigid culling program should begin during late spring and early summer when hens start their annual molt.

The history of the flock should be carefully considered before any culling is done. A flock should never be culled when it is sick or still recovering from a disease. The flockowner must give the birds a chance to recover and come back into production before he can intelligently remove the birds that are not going to return to good production.

Some flocks that start production early in the fall will slump in production around the first of the year. Generally the slump is only a slight neck molt and the birds will return to the normal rate of production in two to four weeks. In this case, it is generally practical to feed the flock through the slump and not do any great amount of culling until after the birds reach their full production level again.

In healthy flocks some continuous culling should be practiced. Flock-owners should remove the obviously sick, lame or injured birds, and those that are not able to stand the competition or stress in the flock. Right here is where good breeding, feeding, housing and management pay off in holding down the number of individuals that “can’t take it” in a healthy flock. General culling, other than removing individual birds can be divided into three phases as explained on the following pages.
Three Phase Culling Program

First Phase: Housing Time Culling
The birds should be culled when moved from range shelter to the laying house. The number of birds available for the house will have some influence on how rigid the birds are culled at this time. Generally only extremely under-size, under-developed, weak, crippled and diseased birds are removed. In other words give the birds a chance if they have characteristics indicating ability to lay. See chart 1.

Second Phase: Fall Culling
After the birds have been in production six to eight weeks or when production reaches 70 to 80 per cent, the flock is ready for a culling to get the non-producers out.

Suspected non-producers can be spotted from comb and head characters and can be caught for a study of body characters.

Culling at night with a flashlight will not disturb the birds as much as day catching.

Chart 2 shows characters which identify the layers and non-layers. (Where yellow pigment is listed the information applies to yellow-skinned birds only).

Birds with yellow skin lose pigment

Keep or Cull?
It is necessary to handle some birds to do the proper job of culling. Keep the bird that has a body like the bird in the pictures at right. She has a long and deep body, at least two finger spread between the pubic or pin bones and three fingers spread between the pin bones and keel bone. Her vent is large and moist. Her abdomen is loose and pliable. The hen on the left is a cull. She has a short shallow body, only one finger spread between pin bones and one finger spread between the pin bones and keel bone. Her vent is puckered and dry. Her abdomen is firm and hard. She is not in laying condition.
Culling the Egg Production Flock

**CHART 1—CHARACTERISTICS INDICATING ABILITY TO LAY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOOD LAYER</th>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>POOR LAYER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alert, Friendly, Active</td>
<td>Temperament</td>
<td>Dull, Listless, Wild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Vitality</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Low Vitality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide, Long, Straight</td>
<td>Back</td>
<td>Narrow, Short, Tapering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep</td>
<td>Depth</td>
<td>Shallow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long, Good Spring</td>
<td>Ribs</td>
<td>Short, Lacking Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large, Deep, Strong</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Shallow, Weak, Crow Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neat, Clean Cut, Refined</td>
<td>Face</td>
<td>Coarse, Beefy, Wrinkled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright, Prominent</td>
<td>Eye</td>
<td>Dull, Sunken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short, Stout</td>
<td>Beak</td>
<td>Long, Thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft, Thin, Silky, Loose</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>Coarse, Thick, Dry, Tight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHART 2—CHARACTERISTICS IDENTIFYING LAYERS AND NON-LAYERS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LAYING HEN</th>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>NON-LAYING HEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large, Red, Waxy, Full</td>
<td>Comb</td>
<td>Small, Pale, Scaly, Shrunken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleached or Bleaching</td>
<td>Beak</td>
<td>Yellow or Growing Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright, Prominent</td>
<td>Eye</td>
<td>Dull, Sunken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleached</td>
<td>Eyelids</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleached</td>
<td>Eye Ring</td>
<td>Yellow-Tinted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neat, Refined</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Beefy, Crow Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible, Wide Apart</td>
<td>Pelvic Bones</td>
<td>Stiff, Close Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep, Soft, Pliable</td>
<td>Abdomen</td>
<td>Shallow, Tough, Tight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large, Moist, Bleached</td>
<td>Vent</td>
<td>Dry, Puckered, Yellow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHART 3—CHARACTERISTICS INDICATING RATE OF PAST PRODUCTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOOD LAYER</th>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>POOR LAYER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completely Bleached</td>
<td>Beak</td>
<td>Yellow or Growing Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleached</td>
<td>Eye Ring</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleached</td>
<td>Ear Lobes</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleached</td>
<td>Shanks</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late (After August 15)</td>
<td>Molt</td>
<td>Early (Before August 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worn, Soiled</td>
<td>Plumage</td>
<td>Glossy, Slick, Loose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>Broodiness</td>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from the vent, eye-ring, ear lobe, beak, and shanks. Here is a key to past production.

Laying Time For Loss Of Pigment

- Vent: 1-2 wks.
- Eye ring and ear lobes: 2-4 wks.
- Beak: 6-8 wks.
- Shanks: 12-20 wks.

Fall culling should be the last culling of a general nature until spring (April or May) when the first of the birds start their annual molt. Weak, crippled or diseased individuals should always be removed whenever they are noticed in the flock.

Third Phase: Spring-Summer Culling

General culling of the flock should start during April or May—after the
Start to look for wing molt as early as April. Market the early molters. Diagram of wings at different stages of molt: (1) shows the 10 old primary feathers (black), the secondary feathers (broken outline), separated by the axial feather (x). At six weeks of molt a slow molter, (2), has one fully grown primary, and feathers 2, 3 and 4 are developing at 2 week intervals. In contrast, a fast molter, (3), has all new feathers. Feathers 1 to 3 were dropped first, now fully developed, feathers 8 to 10 were dropped last, now two weeks old. Two weeks later, (4), feathers 1 to 7 are fully grown. Ten weeks to complete entire molt as compared to 24 weeks for a slow molter.

Birds that have stopped production and are in a wing molt should be culled as soon as they are noticed. Wing molt procedure and time required are explained in the illustration.

During late spring and summer months, flockowners should continue to cull broody, unthrifty, diseased and crippled birds. Broody birds should be marked with colored bands or paint when they go into the broody coop. The second or third mark is reason enough for culling. All the hens should eventually go to market before another production year starts so there is no reason to keep a bird after she stops laying.

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flock has reached its peak spring production and starts to slack off.

At this time the flockowner should watch for non-laying hens as explained under the second phase.

Chart 3 indicates characteristics to look for when considering past production.

When laying stops, yellow pigment returns in the following order:

Pigment Return When Laying Stops
Vent ........................................ ½-1 wks.
Eye ring and ear lobes ..................... 1-2wks.
Beak ........................................... 3-4 wks.
Shanks ....................................... 6-10 wks.
Handling The Culls

Sometimes a flockowner is not sure of himself and his culling technique so he avoids doing anything with the flock.

A slat or wire bottom broody coop or section of laying cages in the house will give a flockowner an opportunity to check his culling accuracy by holding the cull birds a few days to see if they are laying. Feed and water should be provided for the birds while confined.

A poultry hook and a flashlight are probably the two handiest pieces of equipment for culling the birds. You can hook out individuals during the day or find them with a flashlight at night.

Don't try to handle the flock during the day without partitioning off the house and using catching coops, etc. Your local hatcheryman or produce man should have catching equipment that can be borrowed or rented.

Be sure that borrowed equipment is thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before taking it into the poultry house.