Debeaking Poultry

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Debeaking Chickens

About 8% of the chickens lost from all known causes during 1970 were reported lost from cannibalism and blow outs, according to the State Crop and Livestock Reporting Service. Much of this loss could have been avoided by controlling cannibalism in the poultry flock through an adequate debeaking program.

Debeaking is the practice of removing the pinching and tearing part of a bird’s beak and results in less cannibalism and feather picking. Some additional benefit of debeaking is derived from more time being required to eat the necessary amount of feed.

Debeaking chickens to control cannibalism is a widely accepted practice in the poultry industry.

Catching and Handling the Birds

Make every effort to lessen the stress on the birds while catching and handling for debeaking. Caged birds can be handled by taking the debeaker to the cages. Work one cage at a time and be sure to return the birds to the same cage after they are debeaked so they won’t have to reestablish the peck order within the cages.

A permanent or temporary partition through the center of a floor flock pen is handy at catching time. If there are nests, feed, and water on both sides of the partition, the birds will have these necessities while waiting to be debeaked. Drive all of the birds to one side of the partition, then drive a few at a time into a set of catching coops or a small pen. Take them out of the coop or pen for their turn at the debeaker and then place them back on the floor to resume their daily routine. This method only confines the birds for a short period of time.

Some poultrymen prefer to debeak at night or in a darkened room. If it is dark enough, the birds will not move around and can be kept separate with a low partition. A low wattage blue light is sometimes used at night as chickens do not see well in blue light.

The Debeaking Process

Precision debeaking at 6 to 9 days of age will last most birds a lifetime if properly administered.

To debeak a chick, hold its head by placing your thumb on the back of its head with your
forefinger under the throat. Some pressure on your forefinger will pull the tongue back to avoid cutting it and withdraw the lower beak slightly.

Insert the chick's closed beak straight in the 11/64th inch hole in a thin, stainless steel guide plate mounted on the crossbar of a debeaking machine. Heat the cauterizing-cutting blade to glowing cherry red—approximately 1500°F. Flip the switch and a motor-controlled cam will push the hot cutting blade through the beak and keep it in a cauterizing position for 2.5 seconds before the blade moves away from the hole. The cauterization time regulates the amount of beak tissue killed back of the cut. Unless this tissue is killed back beyond a critical point, undesirable regrowth of the beak will occur.

**Debeaking at Other Ages**

The beaks of day-old chickens are extremely small and tender, so great care must be used while debeaking. A baby chick attachment for the machine is a good investment. Hold the chick as explained in precision debeaking and place the beak through the appropriate hole in the "chick attachment" or over the bar of the machine. Bring the knife down and take the desired amount of both beaks off at one time. This is called block debeaking.

Growing birds and laying hens are larger and more difficult to handle. Hold the bird's head in one hand, the thumb and forefinger holding the beak open and the tongue back. Lay the upper beak on the bar or flat surface below the hot knife of the machine. Bring down the hot blade and cut off the desired amount of beak. The knife will cut the beak at an angle toward the mouth if the head is pointed up rather than being held in a horizontal position.

Roll the stump of the beak from side to side against the hot knife to cauterize the wound and stop bleeding and at the same time round the end of the beak.

Remove the end of the lower beak from growing and laying chickens. This is removed in the same manner as the upper beak with one exception. Pointing the head down instead of up will cause the blade to cut the beak with a slant toward the mouth.
Baby Chicks

Cut ½ of upper beak and ½ of lower beak. Cut straight up and down (block debeaking).

Debeaking Equipment
Machines for debeaking are in common use in most poultry areas. Most hatcheries and poultry equipment supply houses have them for sale or can get them. Hatcheries, veterinarians and poultry service establishments will usually rent the equipment or do the work for you for a fee.

If you have a flock of 500 or more birds, it may pay you to have your own machine. There is always a certain danger of spreading disease when borrowing equipment and moving it from one flock to another.

The machine will cost about $35 to $50 without extra attachments.

Do Birds Need Special Care?
The normal recommendation would be to not debeak birds that are physically upset. However, it may be necessary to debeak when some disease problems are at a low level in the flock. At best, debeaking is a stress and birds should be given some special care.

Have enough crew around so the birds can be caught, handled and returned to the pens or cages carefully. Take time to do a uniform job at the debeaker even if it slows you down; speed will come with practice.

If the birds are on a well formulated feed, they should be receiving adequate vitamin K to permit the blood to clot readily.

An antibiotic in the feed for stress may be considered a good investment.

The feed in the troughs should be deep enough to allow the bird to eat without hitting the bottom of the trough or the chain or auger of the automatic feeders.

Water should be deep and if possible high enough off the floor so it is easy for the bird to drink.

Automatic feeders can be set to run often to attract the birds to the feed.
Debeaking Turkeys

Young poultts can be debeaked between 1 and 3 weeks of age by removing about \( \frac{3}{8} \) to \( \frac{3}{4} \) of the upper beak. Growing turkeys can be debeaked by removing \( \frac{1}{2} \) to \( \frac{3}{4} \) of the upper beak. Mature birds should lose \( \frac{1}{2} \) or slightly more of the upper beak in the debeaking process.

Baby Poultts

Cut \( \frac{3}{8} \) to \( \frac{3}{4} \) of upper beak.

Growing Turkeys

Cut \( \frac{1}{2} \) of upper beak, on angle.

Mature Turkeys

Cut \( \frac{1}{2} \) of upper beak, on angle.

Use of a trade name does not imply endorsement of one product over another.