

Cannibalism: Prevention and Treatment

Phillip J. Clauer, Poultry Extension Specialist, Animal and Poultry Sciences

Cannibalism in fowl is a costly and vicious habit that poultry producers can not afford to ignore. It may occur at any age among all breeds, strains and sexes of fowl.

Cannibalism usually occurs when the birds are stressed by a poor management practice. Once becoming stressed, one bird begins picking the feathers, comb, toes or vent of another bird. Once an open wound or blood is visible on the bird, the vicious habit of cannibalism can spread rapidly through the entire flock. If you notice the problem soon after it begins, cannibalism can be held in check. However, if the problem is allowed to get out of hand it can be very costly. Cannibalism will lower the birds value due to torn and damaged flesh, poor feathering and can result in high death losses. Once this habit gets out of hand it is difficult to eliminate.

Since there are numerous reasons for outbreaks of cannibalism, it is important that cannibalism control be a part of your management program.

I. Cannibalism is usually caused by one or more of these conditions:

1. **Overcrowding:** chicks should be allowed:

- 1/4 sq. ft./bird for first 2 weeks
- 1/2 sq. ft./bird for 3-8 weeks
- 1 sq. ft./bird from 8 to 16 weeks of age
- 1.5 sq. ft./bird from 16 weeks on

With gamebirds, double the above recommendations. With pheasants, allow 25 to 30 sq.ft./bird after 12 weeks of age or use pick prevention devices.

2. **Excessive heat:** When the birds become uncomfortably hot they can become extremely cannibalistic. Be sure to adjust the brooding temperature as the young fowl get older.

Brood young fowl at 95°F. for the first week and then decrease the temperature 5°F. per week, until you reach 70°F. or the outside temperature. The temperature should be measured at the height of the birds back directly under the heat source. Do not heat the entire brooding facility to the recommended temperature.

3. **Excessive light:** Extremely bright light or excessively long periods of light will cause birds to become hostile toward one another. Never use white light bulbs larger than 40 watts to brood fowl. If larger bulbs are required for heat, use red or infra-red bulbs.

In birds 12 weeks of age or older, use 15 or 25 watt bulbs above feeding and watering areas.

Don't light fowl more than 16 hours per day. Constant light can be stressful to the birds.

4. **Absence of feed or water or a shortage of feeder and waterer space:** If the birds have to fight for food and water, or if the birds are always hungry they will increase pecking. Be sure that birds have free access to water and feed at all times.
5. **Unbalanced diets:** Extremely high energy and low fiber diets cause the birds to be extra active and aggressive. Feed lacking protein and other nutrients, particularly Methionine, will also cause birds to pick feathers. Make sure you feed a diet balanced appropriately for the age and types of fowl you are raising.
6. **Mixing of different types and colors of fowl:** Mixing different ages of fowl or fowl with different traits promotes pecking by disrupting the flocks normal pecking order. Never brood different species of birds together. Don't brood feathered leg fowl, crested fowl or bearded fowl with fowl without these traits. Curiosity can also start pecking.
7. **Abrupt changes in environment or management practices:** If you plan to move young birds to a new location, it is best to move some of their feeders and waterers with them in order to help them adapt. When you change over to larger feeders and waterers it is helpful to leave the smaller equipment in the pen for a few days to help during the change.
8. **Brightly lit nests or shortage of nesting boxes:** Don't place bright lights near the nesting areas. Also, allow 1 nest for every 5 hens. Vent pecking by layers is also a common problem.
9. **Allowing cripples, injured or dead birds to remain in a flock:** Fowl will pick on cripples or dead birds in their pens because of the social order and curiosity. Once pecking starts it can quickly develop into a vicious habit.
10. **Slow feathering birds are most prone to cannibalism:** Take extra precautions with slow feathering birds. Most cannibalism occurs during feather growth in young fowl. Birds with slow feathering have immature tender feathers exposed for longer periods of time leaving them open to damage from pecking. Don't raise slow feathering birds with other fowl.

II. Additional preventive measures include:

1. Allow the birds to use up their energy in an enclosed outside run. This will keep the birds busy and allow them to peck greens, ground and insects instead of other birds.
2. Give the birds a large handful of fresh greens like clover grass or weeds, each day. This increases the fiber in the birds diet. High fiber diets keep the birds crop full and makes the birds more content.
3. Use of mechanical devices in aggressive birds like gamebirds is advisable.

4. Finally, beak trimming is used in most commercial laying flocks. Trim the beak by remove _ of the top beak and about 1/3 of the lower beak providing a square tip. This makes it difficult for the birds to harm each other. However, beak trimming should be done by someone experienced in proper trimming.

III. Treatment for a cannibalism outbreak:

Since cannibalism can be caused by several conditions, you may not be able to determine the exact cause of the problem. However, stress no matter how slight, is usually the main factor.

1. Try to correct any practices which may have lead to cannibalism.
2. Darkening the facilities by using red bulbs.
3. Remove any badly injured birds.
4. Applying an "anti-peck" ointment or pine tar on any damaged birds usually stops pecking.
5. Lower the pen temperature a bit if possible.

Don't take chances! Make the cannibalism control part of your management program and you will save a great deal of time and money.

Reviewed by Audrey McElroy, associate professor, Animal and Poultry Sciences