



Keeping chickens:

introducing new birds

It's always exciting to bring home new hens, but you'll often find that your existing flock is none too impressed. Val Moody explains how to deal with the relationship problems that can arise

Keeping chickens is addictive, and you may find your flock increases in size quite quickly as you take on new additions. There is also the chance you could lose one or two birds to old age, illness or a predator attack, and decide to replace them. In either case, it's important to bear in mind that introducing new chooks to an established flock can be stressful for both you and your birds, as the pecking order will inevitably get disrupted as a result (see *GYO* February for more details).

The manner in which you choose to do this can be determined by various factors, including: the size of your run; whether your chooks are free range; the ages of the new and existing chickens; and if you are going to mix different breeds.

There are various techniques which can help ease the transition, but bear in mind that a method which is suitable on one occasion may be unsuitable for another, as the situation could differ. You may find you end up trying several different approaches until you find one that works. During this time, it's perfectly possible that your chickens will be getting bullied, stressed, starved or even injured as a result of the change in circumstances, so ensure you are around to monitor the situation and intervene if

required. The stress of disruptions in the pecking order can cause hens to stop laying, so it's as well to sort problems as quickly as possible if you want your supply of fresh eggs to go uninterrupted.

Non-intervention

I have heard several stories about owners who have thought that by shutting new birds in to roost at night with the others, come morning the existing flock will think they have always been there. Or that by spraying all the birds with vinegar so they all smell the same, the new chickens won't be singled out. I am sorry to say this underestimates the intelligence of chooks – they will almost certainly still detect strangers in the camp (even if they do smell pickled) and, at worst, a distressing free-for-all may then begin. You may be lucky and not have too much of a problem, but if you choose this option, make sure you are around in case you need to intervene.

Shock treatment

If you have a large enclosure and your new chickens are a compatible breed (see box: *Introducing new breeds*) and the same age and size as your current flock, after the initial two week period (see box, right:

Preparing for new stock) you could try putting the newcomers in to roost with the others overnight. Make sure the existing flock has settled down for the night before you do so. The more space they have the better, as the new birds will have space to run and hide if they are attacked.

Supply several feeders and drinkers for them and in the morning open the pop hole, watch how they are getting on and ensure you are available to monitor them and check that the new birds are





Preparing for new stock: what to do

- Be sure to get an additional coop, and isolate the newcomers for at least two weeks – this prevents the spread of any diseases they may be carrying.
- When you're deciding how best to merge the two groups, consider the size of the pen: whether they're confined to a run or are free range will have a big influence on the outcome when you're introducing new stock.
- If you have a small pen and your stock are permanently confined, introducing newcomers may be problematic since the new birds may not have the space to run or hide from bullies. Even if they have somewhere to hide they're often found and attacked by others. If you have a large pen or keep free range chickens, the newcomers will have more space to get away and feed in peace.

eating and drinking. As long as the new birds give out all the right submissive gestures (crouching, looking or walking the other way) the process may be smoother, and there may only be quiet murmurs or bickering. In this situation, leave them be, but still keep an eye on them. The newcomers may be denied roosting space by the others, or be unsure where to sleep, so you could have to help settle them at night until they become familiar with their new surroundings.

Separate them

If your chickens are permanently free range, it may be wise to keep the new flock in a coop with an attached run for a week to help them get their bearings, as they may otherwise get scared and decide to run off or roost in nearby trees and shrubs – and it may be difficult to round them up again. Once they're more settled, introduce them to the main coop by perching them with the others at night.

If the new birds are younger than the current flock, give them their own pen until they get older, otherwise they may get bullied by the others. Keep them in a separate pen close to the existing flock until they mature and grow to the same physical size as the older birds. If you must amalgamate young birds with an older flock, introduce them slowly, keeping an eye on them to make sure they eat, drink and are not attacked. Alternatively, you could try putting the existing flock and the newcomers together in a separate coop that neither has lived in before, as this will be a new experience for all of them. Or, try disorienting the original flock by putting them in the temporary coop, and placing the new birds in the existing enclosure.

Provide distractions

It is a good idea to try and keep your birds busy during the introduction period, distracting them to take their mind off the presence of new stock. Hang up CDs, mirrors or some tasty greens from the ceiling of the hen house, or provide treats such as mixed corn or fruit to occupy them. Create dust baths, and scatter leaves or compost on the floor of the run so the chickens have to scratch the ground to find their

food. Add outside roosting poles or branches in the pen, which will provide nervous birds with more places to seek refuge.

Whichever method you use to combine the flocks, it is usually beneficial to:

- Carry it out at dusk or in the dark, when the birds are relaxed, sleepy and calm.
- If you already have a male bird established in your flock, don't introduce another. Hens will tussle to position themselves in the pecking order, but roosters fight for supremacy and may kill each other.
- Reduce the status of a very bossy hen by moving her out of sight of the others into a temporary pen for a week – when re-introduced she will, hopefully be at the bottom of the pecking order.

Deal with conflict

If there is severe bullying, and the new chickens don't get a chance to eat or drink as a result (this will be worse if they're in a small pen), try one of the following methods to tackle the problem:

- Place a temporary coop within the pen, or create a partition by dividing the main enclosure with wire. Then, either put the new birds on one side and the existing flock on the other, or place the newcomers in the temporary coop. Alternatively, if you do not have space in your existing pen to do either, you'll need to place a separate coop outside in view of the existing flock. This will still allow the two groups to see each other and interact.
- Place food and water for each flock of birds on either side of the boundary and in close proximity to each other – this will allow them to get used to feeding together, as opposed to sparring. When they are used to each other, roost the newcomers with the others at night and allow the whole group to interact in the morning. Watch how they are getting on and, if everything is looking good, remove the partition or temporary coop. If things are not going well and there are some brutal attacks (do not confuse this with bickering, which is to be



GYO tips: introducing new birds

Successfully mixing birds of different ages will be difficult: unable to stand up for themselves, young pullets may well be bullied by larger mature chickens.

- Some breeds and individual birds are more aggressive than others – Faverolles, Orpington, Brahma and Polish are all prone to getting bullied, while some game birds and certain strains of Wyandottes can be particularly domineering.
- Smaller flocks usually have a stronger pecking order compared with larger troops, so introduction may be traumatic. A large flock usually consists of small groups with their own pecking order; each group will stick together.
- Never introduce one new bird at a time. Instead, always do so in groups of two or more to stop the attention getting focused on a solo stranger. The newcomers can also keep each other company during the introduction period.



expected even in established groups) you could reinstate the partition or put them back in their temporary coop, and then continue to roost them with the others at night until they settle down.

- If one or all the newcomers are being excessively bullied and are showing signs of injury as a result, it is best to remove any victims. If a bird is bleeding it will attract unwanted attention from the others – even a small cut could lead to cannibalism, as blood is very attractive to chickens. Keep the victim still within sight of the others, again by placing another coop next to the existing one, or placing a small pen or cage in the run with the others. Once the chicken has fully recovered, return it to roost with the others at dusk and put it back in its own pen at dawn, or as you open the pop hole.

Useful contacts

- Val runs **Chicken School**, which provides tailored one-to-one chicken keeping courses that are ideal for families. The Swindon, Wiltshire set-up also offers small group courses. You can learn everything you want to know about getting started keeping chickens to ensure you get the most from your hens. A free information pack is provided on all courses. For existing keepers there's also an advisory service, and a service for schools and other organisations. To find out more, call 01793 331 796 or visit chickenschool.co.uk
- **The Fold Ark Deluxe chicken house** is perfect to use as temporary accommodation in which to isolate birds. It's available from Ascott Smallholding Supplies, 0845 130 6285, ascott.biz and costs £116.99.
- **The Battery Hen Welfare Trust and the Smallholder Range** have developed a specially formulated range of feed that meets the unique nutritional needs of ex-battery hens. For more information visit smallholderfeed.co.uk or, if you'd like to find out more about rehoming battery hens, visit bhwt.org.uk