



KEEPING CHICKENS: hen school

Even the most pampered bird can fall foul of behavioural problems – either self-inflicted or caused by others in her flock. Poultry expert Val Moody explains the causes and cures for the most common setbacks

Chickens live by a hierarchical social system known as the pecking order – each bird has its own place, and can boss around those that are lower in the chain. This happens within all animal groups – it's a fact of nature. Chickens usually have their own favourite spots, eat in a given sequence and allow the top hen, rooster or cockerel preferential access to mates. It is a very brave bird that challenges one who ranks higher, as the result will range from a nasty peck to a full-on fight.

Understanding the pecking order

You may not notice the social system in your established flock as they will all know their place. But if you watch carefully you may be able to see it at work – the stronger, more assertive birds will acquire the prime positions in a dust bath, have first crack at any tasty morsel and get the most comfortable roosting spots. The lowliest chicken

EGG EATING

Once chickens start to consume their own eggs and those of others, the practice can be hard to break, and may spread to every bird in the flock. Like all bad habits, it is easier to prevent it from happening in the first place than to stop an established routine. It often starts by accident after a soft shell breaks or an egg gets crushed, but once your hens have acquired the taste they will start to deliberately crack shells.

Causes:

- Overcrowding which leads to boredom and bickering
- Illness, poor diet and a lack of calcium can affect egg shell quality, causing it to break more easily
- A bird is deprived of food as it's at the bottom of the pecking order
- Too much light in the nest box area – since hens like to lay in dark, secret places, seeing their eggs may cause them to be more inquisitive
- Not enough nest boxes or nesting material – this can lead to bickering which can cause eggs to be broken
- Chickens are fed their own shells as a calcium supplement, and so acquire the taste

Prevention:

- Ensure you maintain good cleanliness and hygiene to prevent illness
- Provide several feeders to ensure the lowliest bird has access to one

- Make sure they have enough room, using outside roosting poles to provide extra areas for them to go and so help reduce boredom
- Give them a constant supply of fresh, nutritious feed and extra calcium (oyster shell) to help the production of strong eggshells
- Do not give them treats until late afternoon, to ensure they eat their regular feed
- Ensure nest boxes are placed in the darkest spot (or hang strips of dark material in front of them to reduce the amount of light present) and provide a thick layer of good nesting material
- Remove aggressive birds, temporarily or permanently
- Collect eggs regularly throughout the day

Cure:

- Try to identify the culprits (look for the incriminating sign of egg yolk on their beaks) and remove them temporarily. Place china eggs in their nest box, or a bad tasting one – try filling an empty shell with mustard or pepper, for example
- Change the nest box design, so that eggs slide out of sight and reach: slope the base so the egg rolls to the back of the nest box into a container filled with soft material, like straw
- If the problem cannot be solved, the only answer may be to permanently isolate the egg eaters

FEATHER PECKING

A chicken can damage its own plumage, by pecking at mites for example, though unruly members of the flock (almost always hens, not males) are just as likely to be to blame. Once blood starts to flow, the birds become particularly excited and find it irresistible, and will peck at the victim even more.

Causes:

- Mixing incompatible breeds together. Some, like the slow, heavy Brahma are prone to bullying – so pairing this bird with the dominating Wyandotte could cause problems. And an ex-battery hen which has been cooped up (and very bored) may have tried pecking her inmates, neighbours or her own feathers, taking the habit with her when moved to a new home.
- Keeping more than one cockerel or rooster in close quarters can lead to bullying and fighting over territory and hens
- Injured or moulting birds
- Illness or a runt chicken
- An infestation of lice or mites can result in a hen pecking its own feathers to try to relieve the itching. Others may begin to peck the chicken once the skin has been broken
- Lack of nutrients, poor diet or water – this can result in them searching for nutrients from their own or others' feathers
- Overcrowding or boredom
- Introducing new stock or aggressive birds to an existing pecking order
- The incorrect use of artificial light in the hen house (too bright or at irregular times) to extend natural day light hours and so increase egg production. It can

create an unnatural environment and this can lead to confusion and stress.

Prevention:

- Only mix compatible birds together
- Remove sick or injured hens, especially if you find that blood is present
- Help chickens recover from moulting more quickly by feeding them extra protein (such as mealworms) and supplements like poultry spice and cider vinegar
- Make sure parasites are controlled as best you can, in order to stop infestations
- Ensure feed is fresh and contains sufficient nutrients
- Supply enough feeders and drinkers
- Monitor newcomers and permanently or temporarily remove aggressive birds
- If you're using artificial lighting in the coop, try to reduce the light intensity
- Ensure enough space is provided and foraging material is available

Cures:

- Apply a nasty tasting substance to the area, like Stockholm tar, gentian violet spray or mustard. You could also try Pecka-Block – a natural cereal-based block that helps reduce feather and vent pecking through stimulating the birds' senses. It's available from Ascott Smallholding Supplies – to order, call 0845 130 6285 or visit ascott.biz
- Most laying hens are beak-trimmed (removal of the pointed tip of the upper beak) to prevent feather pecking. I personally dislike this practice as it can stop your hens eating certain foods such as the tips of grass blades and other fine morsels.



Sometimes, the top bird may lose their reign either temporarily or permanently, and the hierarchy adjusts. This can be due to an injury or sickness, or because the top bird has been removed from the others for some time, such as the temporary relocation of a hen to stop her being broody, or to allow her to raise chicks.

JARGON BUSTER

Cockerel – a male chicken under one year old
Rooster – a male chicken over one year old

NEXT MONTH...
 Val reveals clever ways to deal with broody hens

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 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 the detailed website, chickenschool.co.uk
- **Dummy eggs** and **gentian violet spray** (anti-pecking and antiseptic spray) are available from Flyte So Fancy, 01300 345 229, flytesofancy.co.uk
- **Stockholm tar** is available from Omlet, 0845 450 2056, omlet.co.uk
- The Smallholder Range make and sell a range of high-quality **natural poultry feeds**. For further details call 0800 028 1496 or log on to the website, smallholderfeed.co.uk
- **Wooden hen houses** (and dog kennels) are available from Feathers Animal Housing, 01366 500 828, feathers-animal-housing.com
- A selection of **poultry keeping equipment** is available from Ascott Smallholding Supplies, 0845 130 6285, ascott.biz and Country Fayre, 0845 094 0560, countryfayre.co.uk

can be picked on for apparently no good reason, and it's usually the last to eat or drink.

The cockerel or rooster is normally top of the pecking order, but in his absence hens take over (and they can also overrule an immature cockerel). The subordinate chicken will often walk away if a dominant bird comes near and may squat in a submissive stance or run away quickly. The

dominant birds often put their hackles up (just like a dog) to show disapproval and potentially attack if the subordinate does not show respect. They may also make a growling noise, warning the other chicken to go away. Even young chooks can be seen playing and sparing with each other as they try to assert themselves and establish their position within the hierarchy. The pecking order will become particularly obvious if your hens are overcrowded or when new birds are introduced to an established flock – the new arrivals will cause a reshuffle in the hierarchy. Any of these problems can also further aggravate bad habits such as egg eating and feather pecking (see boxes, left and above).

Coping with it

You can't prevent the pecking order but you can alleviate the troubles it causes, by ensuring you provide sufficient space for your chickens to roam and forage, and so help to stop boredom setting in. Keeping compatible breeds of the same age together in the same pen (which prevents bullying), a good diet of nutritious feed; and good health all help to reduce any negative impact the hierarchy can have on your flock. If you have a particularly bossy hen you can often remove her status by moving her out of sight of the others into a temporary pen for a week – she will be reintroduced as a stranger, and hopefully at the bottom of the pecking order.

