

Preparing Poultry for Show¹

F. Ben Mather and Jacqueline P. Jacob²

Preparing poultry for fairs and shows is challenging, educational, and rewarding in many ways. Birds have the ability to learn and respond to specific training experiences. They reflect the exhibitor's care, knowledge, skill, and training. Poultry refers to birds that people keep for their use and generally includes the chicken, turkey, duck, goose, quail, pheasant, pigeon, guinea fowl, pea fowl, ostrich, emu and rhea.

SELECTING YOUR BIRDS

Select only healthy birds. This is important for two reasons. First, it increases your chances of winning since a healthy bird will usually have good physical condition and bright plumage. Second, it reduces the chances of spreading disease to other flocks.

Birds may easily contract or transmit diseases at poultry shows and fairs. A sick or ailing bird should never be brought to a public exhibition. Minimize contact with other birds. Some birds may carry disease-causing organisms without showing any major signs of the disease.

Two weeks before fitting your birds for show, check for external parasites (such as mites, lice, fleas, etc.) and treat as necessary. For information on identification and treatment of external parasites, refer to Fact Sheet PS-10, "Common Continuous External Parasites of Poultry".

For information on selecting chickens for show, refer to Fact Sheet PS-33, "Selecting Chickens for Show".

TRAINING YOUR BIRDS

How well your bird places in a show depends on its condition, its disposition, how closely it conforms to the standard description for its breed and variety (for purebred/exhibition category), and how it compares with other birds in its category at the show.

Select your birds early. Allow sufficient time for preparation and training. Birds should be trained and prepared to display their best qualities. Birds unaccustomed to confinement in

-
1. This document is Fact Sheet PS-34, one of a series of the Dairy and Poultry Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published May 1998. Please visit the FAIRS Web site at <http://hammock.ifas.ufl.edu>.
 2. F. Ben Mather, extension poultry specialist, and Jacqueline P. Jacob, extension coordinator, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

The use of trade names in this publication is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee or warranty of the products named, and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others of suitable composition.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office. Florida Cooperative Extension Service / Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences / University of Florida / Christine Taylor Waddill, Dean

cages do not “show” to their best advantage unless trained beforehand.

Getting birds accustomed to a cage is a simple process if started early. At least one week before the show, place each show bird in a cage similar to ones used by poultry shows. Handle each bird two to three times a day in a manner similar to that used in judging.

The procedure for properly removing a bird from a cage is a three-step operation:

Step 1. Approach the cage slowly, open the door quietly and prepare to remove the bird, head first. Maneuver the bird until it stands with its head to your right or left. Then reach into the coop and across the back of the bird with your right hand (left-handed persons will use their left hand), firmly but gently grasp the most distant wing at the shoulder. Keep the wing folded and close to the bird’s body.

Step 2. Rotate the bird in the cage so that its head is pointing toward you and the open door.

Step 3. Slide your free hand, palm upward, underneath the bird’s breast. Simultaneously, grasp the bird’s right leg (just above the hock joint) between your thumb and index finger while clasping the left leg between the second and third fingers. This places your index and second fingers between the bird’s legs. The keel bones should be resting upon the palm of your hand.

Bring the bird out of the cage head first, keeping its head toward you. After holding the bird for awhile, open the wings and examine various parts of the body. Always return the bird to the cage head first and lower it gently to the floor of the cage. To determine body balance and “set of legs”, some judges like to drop heavy breed birds about 6 inches to the cage floor. A quick recovery means good balance and placement of legs.

When accustomed to this confinement and handling, the bird will present a good appearance to the judge. Many entries of good merit are never seriously considered by the judge because they have not been trained. Frightened birds tend to stand in a crouched rather than normal position, thus their true type is not revealed to the judge. The tail may touch the cage and be carried to one side, the bird may become restless from confinement, the cage litter may not feel natural and the bird may assume an awkward posture. Birds unaccustomed to handling may struggle when examined. Any of these things will give the judge unfavorable impressions. Therefore, it is recommended that you train your birds to get used to a cage.

EFFECT OF SUN ON COLORED BREEDS

Although sunshine will not harm birds, show birds should not spend several hours per day in direct sunlight. Sunshine can fade the plumage of solid red breeds and those with red backgrounds, such as Mille Fleur bantams, or cause brassiness (yellowish metallic hue) in varieties with pale plumage, especially white, blue or buff. Once the plumage becomes faded, there is no way of correcting this before a show. Moderate exposure to the sun should not be a problem. It is the constant day after day exposure that can cause problems.

WASHING YOUR BIRDS

When white plumage is soiled and dirty, it does not look good in a show cage. Birds with light-colored plumage (such as white, blue, or buff) should be washed before they are taken to a poultry show. Birds with dark-colored plumages such as Barred Plymouth Rock chickens, Rouen ducks, and Bronze turkeys, very seldom need to be washed unless their plumage becomes severely soiled.

Learning to wash birds is not difficult, but it is best to practice on some birds not intended for exhibit. It is best to wash birds the day or night before they are to be exhibited or taken to the show.

If you are washing a number of birds, the multi-tub method is best (a soaping tub & 2-3 rinse tubs). If you only have a few to wash, it can be done in the bathtub (large birds) or sink (bantam chickens and ducks). In either case, the area in which the birds are to be washed should be 80°F-90°F and free from drafts. You should have cages to place the birds in after they are washed. If the birds will be returned to floor pens after they are washed, it is important to place plenty of clean straw or shavings on the floor to keep the birds from becoming soiled again.

Multi-tub method

Items required:

- Detergent. Some detergents make feathers dry and brittle. Recommended detergents include Lux flakes, Ivory, Cheer or Casteel soap.
- Vinegar
- Bluing
- Sponge
- Soft, old toothbrush and tooth picks
- Four washing tubs
- Optional: 50% malathion wettable powder

The multi-tub method requires four tubs for white birds and three for all others. To save strain on your back, it is best to place them on boxes or benches. The first two tubs should be filled with warm water (95°F) and the third with water at room temperature.

The first tub is used for the actual cleaning of the birds. Soap or detergent is added to the tub. Make a good suds before putting the bird into the

water. Grasp the bird with both hands and lower it gently into the water, holding the wings so they cannot be flapped. With the bird standing on the bottom of the tub, release one hand but hold the bird firmly with the other. With the free hand, gently move the feathers on all parts of the body so the soap and water will penetrate to the skin. Then with a small brush, sponge, or your hand, work the soapy water through the feathers. Make sure to rub the feathers from base to tip to prevent feather breakage. Do not put the bird's head under water.

While the bird is still in the first tub, take a soft, old toothbrush and scrub legs gently to remove any dirt or molting scales. Malathion (1¼ ounces of 50% malathion wettable powder or emulsifiable concentrate per gallon of water) can be added to the wash water to help rid the birds of any external parasites.

When the plumage has been thoroughly washed, transfer the birds to the second tub containing a small amount of vinegar and thoroughly rinse out as much of the soap as possible. The vinegar will help remove the soap. It is important to remove all the soap, otherwise the feathers will stick and be streaked.

For birds other than white, the third tub should contain plain water and a fourth tub is not required. For white birds, the third rinse tub should contain a small amount of bluing (for example, Boraten), just enough to give the water a slight blue color. It is important not to get the water too blue or it will give the plumage a bluish tinge. The bluing helps whiten, condition, and give the feathers a sheen. Too much bluing may dye the feathers. White birds are then placed in a fourth tub, with plain water, for a final rinsing.

When the washed bird is removed from the final rinsing, the plumage should be dried as much as possible. Work as much water as possible out with the hands, then dry with a towel. After the

birds are thoroughly dry, you can polish their feathers with a pure silk cloth.

The birds should be placed in a drying cage in a warm room. Birds cannot stand excessive heat, so do not place them too close to a heat source. Take care that the birds do not soil their plumage during the drying process. If two or more birds have been washed, keep them separated until dry.

A bird can be washed in 15 to 20 minutes, although it may take 12 to 18 hours for it to dry. Birds should dry slowly for best results, however a hair dryer can be used carefully to hasten drying.

If you are grooming loosely feathered birds like Cochin or Silkie chickens, using a hair dryer will help puff out the feathers. A hair dryer also works well on crests. Most breeds, though, look better if they dry slowly. Fluffing plumage with a hair dryer can be downright disastrous in tight-feathered breeds such as Cornish or Old English Game.

Crested breeds need more grooming than other birds. The crest especially needs a great deal of attention. After washing the body plumage, hold the bird by the legs, allowing the head to hang down. Submerge the crest feathers keeping the eyes above the water, working the suds into the topknot until it is well lathered. In the case of an extremely dirty crest, sprinkle a few drops of mild liquid soap into the head feathers. However, no amount of washing will brighten a crest that is yellow, brassy or dry from too much sun.

AFTER WASHING ACTIVITIES

After the bird has been washed and dried, examine it to make sure no dirt remains under the scales. If some is found, it should be removed with a toothpick. A small piece of cloth moistened with baby oil, vitamin E oil, or olive oil should be rubbed over the comb, wattles, beak, and shanks of the birds. A mixture of equal parts

of alcohol, glycerin, and olive oil makes an excellent cleaning and polishing solution for shanks, feet, comb and wattles. Do not apply too much as the plumage may become stained. Buff the head and leg parts with a clean, soft rag until all the oil has been worked in, taking great care not to get oil on any feathers.

Although it is extremely rare, a bird may develop stubs after the skin of the feet and shanks are softened with oil or cleaning solution. Therefore, it is a good idea to recheck all specimens before taking birds to the show.

If you are grooming a breed with white ear lobes, such as Leghorn, Minorca, or Rosecomb chickens, coat the washed and dried lobes with baby powder to keep them clean.

Check toenails and beak to see if any need trimming. If the toenails need trimming, use dog nail trimmers and then file lightly, with a nail file, to round off edges after. Use a toothpick to clean around the bird's nostrils. Since a bird that spends much of its time caged can't keep its beak properly trimmed by scraping it on the ground, trim back the upper beak if necessary. A pair of nail clippers and a nail file will work for this.

Dusting with corn starch helps keep cleaned, white plumage in a freshened condition during transport.

TRANSPORTING YOUR BIRDS

For transporting your birds to the show or fair, use a good, solid but light, shipping cage. Never ship or bring birds to a show in a flimsy cage or box. Clean, dry straw or wood shavings should be placed in the cage. Do not provide a water cup for it will spill when the cage is moved and wet the straw or wood shavings, which will stain the plumage. If you are traveling long distances in hot weather, some provision should be made to provide water at intervals during transport.

CARE OF BIRDS DURING THE SHOW

Make sure your birds have plenty of feed and water, whether provided by you or by the fair personnel.

CARE OF BIRDS AFTER THE SHOW

Care is as essential after the show as before. It is advisable to keep your returning birds as far away as possible from your other birds for at least 14 days after their return home. If any disease has been contracted, it will be evident before show birds are returned to the flock. During the quarantine period, always care for your show birds after caring for your other birds, to reduce the possibility of disease transmission.

Do not dispose of birds after a show just because they did not place high in their class. Sometimes the best bird in the class will receive a low ranking due to a lack of maturity or feather condition.

SHOWING GAME BREEDS

There are two breeds of game chickens -- Modern Game and Old English Game. Cocks from such breeds should be dubbed to be shown. Dubbing involves removal of the comb, and sometimes the wattles. Nondubbing is a disqualification. In a youth poultry show, nondubbed game cocks will receive white ribbons.