ALTERNATIVE LIVESTOCK SYSTEMS

Getting Started with Broilers

BACKGROUND

As spring approaches, a broad range of enthusiasts, from backyard gardeners to small scale farm operators, begin to think about adding chickens (especially broilers), to their summer production activities. Whether growing for profit or as a source of food for the family, raising broilers can be a rewarding and educational experience for everyone in the family. It’s easy to get a batch of chicks started, at relatively low cost, and they grow quickly, ready to be processed and put into your freezer or sold to customers in only 6-12 weeks, depending on the breed of bird and the weight you want them to have at processing.

Of course, raising healthy livestock of any type for fun or profit requires some attention to planning and detail, and broilers are no exception. By just following a few basic, general guidelines about the needs of baby chicks and growing chickens it will help ensure that you achieve success with the birds you raise.

WHEN ORDERING CHICKS

- Hatcheries in Minnesota and around the country can be found online by searching google, or by looking at Poultry U (http://poultryu.umn.edu/).

- Plan their arrival around their departure. Cornish Cross Broilers (most commonly raised) need only 6-8 weeks to reach a market carcass weight of 4-6 pounds. Other breeds that grow slower may take 10-12 weeks. You will need to arrange processing well in advance. If you grow birds for your own consumption within the limits of a town or city, check the local governmental ordinances prior to processing the birds in your backyard, as this is not typically allowed.

- You can order cockerels (males), pullets (females), or a straight run (mixed batch). Cockerels are a little more expensive, but grow faster. They may weigh one lb more than pullets at processing, at the same age.
• Consider having the birds vaccinated at the hatchery against *Coccidiosis*. It is cheap to do so, and then you will very likely have healthy birds throughout their short growing period. This vaccine will help give the birds protection against a very common and costly poultry disease. Doing so can then give you the option of using non-medicated feed throughout the production period.

**PREPARING FOR THEIR ARRIVAL**

• Provide a clean space, draft free, protected from predators. A small room, or an area inside a building that is fenced in with hardware cloth or chicken wire will help ensure the safety of the birds, while keeping them close to heat, feed, and water.

• Use bedding- wood shavings are best, but if there is a plentiful supply of clean straw at low cost, it will work fine with proper management. Straw does not absorb well (unless chopped), so it will need to be supplemented frequently with clean, dry straw. While keeping the environment draft free, the birds also need fresh, clean air. Too much humidity or the smell of ammonia resonating from wet, dirty bedding is irritating to the birds and can rapidly lead to pneumonia. If you smell ammonia, apply fresh bedding immediately!

• Provide a heat source such as heat lamps- chicks need 90-95 degrees Fahrenheit in the first week of life. Gradually reduce the temperature by 5 degrees per week, over the next 3-4 weeks to around 70 degrees. Birds are fully feathered at 4 weeks of age, and will need little or no extra heat unless they are being raised in cold weather, such as below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. If they have access to the outdoors, wind and humidity are also factors that affect bird comfort. For chicks that are under 4 weeks of age, it might be worthwhile to build a small hover to help hold the heat close to the floor, if the room is larger and the air is cold away from the heat bulbs.

• An infrared bulb only heats the body of the chick, but not the air around the bird. In really cold weather, it’s probably better to use a regular incandescent heat bulb, though it does stimulate the birds, making them more active and aggressive.

• Appropriately-sized feeders and waterers are necessary so that chicks can eat and drink upon arrival. You will need to dunk each chick’s beak in the water trough, so that they will know where the water is and how to access it.
- Provide a chick starter feed to give them a balanced ration, that is 20-22% protein or close to it, at least for the first week, and up to week four. Then switch to a grower ration, but no less than 18-19% protein for the duration.

**MANAGEMENT STEPS TO HELP THEM THRIVE**

- Give them clean water twice daily.

- Full feed for the first week, then remove the feed at night for the next 3 weeks. This will help prevent *Flip Disease*, which is a heart attack from overeating. It is not unusual to lose 1-2% of the flock to this disease, and almost always the biggest, fastest growing birds are the ones that succumb. Be sure to have plenty of feeder space during this period of feed withdrawal, because in the morning the chicks will be hungry and will run over each other to eat.

- Clean bedding around the waterers frequently. Otherwise there will be ammonia buildup in the room. Add bedding as needed to keep the chicks clean and dry.

- Keep the area as bio-secure as possible. Do not let visitors into the pen where the chicks are.

- Finally, in hot weather, when the birds are in the final weeks of growth, and it’s over 85-90 degrees, pull the feed during the hottest part of the day. Birds can be stressed by the heat and die during this period, especially if they eat heavily during the heat of the day.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Go to our Small Farms U web page at:

[http://www.extension.umn.edu/food/small-farms/livestock/poultry/](http://www.extension.umn.edu/food/small-farms/livestock/poultry/) and review the youtube videos listed below.

Raising chickens #1: setting up the space
Raising chickens #2: moving chicks into the space
Raising chickens #3: supplemental heat

See also: University of Minnesota Extension Poultry program at [http://poultryu.umn.edu/](http://poultryu.umn.edu/).

**QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?**

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