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Behavioural disorders of backyard poultry

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Most behavioural disorders do not represent actual disease, but rather the expression of normal behaviours in an altered way or in an inappropriate place. In the majority of cases, it is a failure to understand the needs of the bird and its normal behaviours that leads to management failure and an expression of the problematic behaviours. The majority of behavioural problems can be prevented by:

- Provision of a large enclosure with:
  - Adequate foraging opportunities
  - Adequate grooming opportunities
  - Adequate feeding and watering space/stations and laying boxes
  - Protection from the actual and perceived intrusion of predators
- Establishing the correct social structure for each species (there are various husbandry books out there that can be consulted).
- The correct way of introducing new individuals.
- Establishing a daily routine and encouraging birds into night-time accommodation using positive reinforcement.

FEATHER DESTRUCTION

Feather-destructive disorders are not seen in poultry to the extent encountered in parrots. It is also highly unusual for birds to peck at and destroy their own feathers – the vast majority of cases are caused by other birds pecking at the feathers. The areas typically affected include the head, dorsum and vent region. The underlying cause is generally an exaggerated formation of the pecking order, with over-aggression from one or more birds towards at least one other. It is not rare for many birds to be affected. In some cases, most birds are affected with just one or two birds causing the pecking.

In other cases of feather-destructive disorders, there may be an underlying disease, with birds pecking at ectoparasites or at a reddened vent following gastrointestinal/urogenital disease.

Control is achieved by reducing the likelihood of antisocial interactions. Most of these interactions occur at specific locations, often where there is increased competition (e.g. for food, water or roosting). Providing additional feeders and drinkers, as well as ensuring that there are more laying boxes and roosting space, will greatly reduce antisocial interactions. Encouraging dust bathing and foraging is also important.

VENT PECKING AND CANNIBALISM

To a large extent, vent pecking is an extension of feather pecking. However, the consequences are far greater and can often result in the death of the affected bird.

These birds are frequently cannibalised after death, and it can be difficult to determine whether the damage around the vent occurred ante or post mortem. It should be borne in mind that similar findings can also be found with some predators or rodents.

Vent pecking can become habit-forming, and known vent peckers should be removed from the flock. A frequent trigger is diarrhoea or partial prolapse, resulting in vent protrusion and creation of a 'bullseye' target for pecking. This is often enhanced in laying birds that have fewer feathers around the vent.

Affected birds should be assessed for any underlying conditions. The behavioural approach is the same as that for feather destruction. The wounds of affected birds should be treated similarly to any other granulating open wounds. Severely affected birds may need to be removed from the flock to prevent the birds from further attack.

HEAD PECKING

Head pecking may occur in groups of female waterfowl. Eye injuries are possible but unusual, and it is rare to see much physical damage (unlike in chickens). Where one bird is driven off food, additional feeding and drinking sites need to be put in place.

EATING FOREIGN BODIES

Eating foreign bodies has been shown to be pica and the result of a behavioural disorder. The disorder can be learnt by others and is passed on to chicks. The root cause appears to be a lack of foraging and stress. The main consequence is crop impaction. Once established, it can be difficult to break the habit. Provision of increased foraging opportunities may help, as will the removal of the preferred material for ingestion from the enclosure. Affected birds should not rear their own chicks and should not be paired with other birds for breeding, to 'dilute' the problem.

COCKEREL CROWING

This is a normal behaviour but can be disruptive to owners and their neighbours, especially in summer when crowing starts at first light early in the morning. The best means of avoidance is not to keep a cockerel. However, this does mean that it is harder to maintain the flock pecking order and that breeding is not possible.

Birds generally do not crow at night, so providing lightproof housing for overnight accommodation means that the cockerel can be let out and allowed to crow at a reasonable time during the day. Anti-crow collars are used by some backyard chicken keepers.

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A Velcro collar is placed on the cockerel's neck, which prevents him from extending his neck to crow.

Deslorelin implants have been used with variable success rates.

Devoicing is ineffective at preventing crowing.

PEACOCK SCREAMING

The problem is very similar in nature to cockerel crowing; however, captive peafowl are rarely restrained or housed at night, so the problem is much more difficult to control. The major problem occurs in spring/summer each year when young males disperse to form new territories and then call for females.

Naturally, these new territories tend to be formed in other people's gardens! As with cockerels, the birds tend to call from first light.

Prevention is achieved by enclosing the birds at night. This is easier said than done, as peafowl are notoriously flighty. Birds are encouraged into an enclosed space using food bait. This may take time, but it is relatively simple, as most peafowl are fed by owners.

The birds can gradually be fed closer to a coop, such that they may be trapped inside at some point. Birds should not be trapped the first time they enter the coop; the positive reinforcement effects are lost.

SPUR DAMAGE

Damage from the spurs of cockerels is common. In the case of male-male aggression, this can be prevented by never housing two male birds together.

Cockerel damage to hens is also seen. This is usually where the spurs of the cockerel are dug into the flanks of the hen during mating, and can sometimes cause deep wounds. Prevention is by removing or trimming/blunting the spurs.

If a cockerel is particularly vigorous during mating and causes damage even after the spurs have been trimmed, replacement of the bird should be considered, or the placement of a poultry 'saddle' on the hens to help reduce mating injuries.

AGGRESSION DURING MATING IN DUCKS

This is male-to-female aggression and occurs during the breeding season when females may be mobbed by multiple male birds. Injuries around the neck may be seen, and some females may even drown when over-vigorous mating occurs in water. The worst offenders tend to be mallards or mallard crosses. Treatment involves removing females from the group of male birds. Wounds can be treated routinely.

Prevention is achieved by ensuring that only a single male is kept with a group of females.

AGGRESSION TOWARDS PEOPLE OR OTHER SPECIES

Aggression towards other species is reported in all poultry. Birds will attack all potential predators, especially dogs. This behaviour is commonly utilised when employing geese for guarding. There is no solution to this problem other than avoidance. If the aggression is severe, the offender will need to be removed.

BROODINESS

Hens, particularly bantams, may become broody. This is a natural behaviour where a hen stops continuing to lay eggs but instead attempts to incubate a clutch of eggs. Some hens may gather eggs from other birds as well. Removing the eggs and placing the hen with the rest of the flock will not eliminate the behaviour.

The hen can either be allowed to incubate a fertile clutch or have dummy eggs placed underneath her, and have them removed after 28 days and replace the hen within the flock.

Traditionally, in an attempt to get a valuable hen out of broodiness and return to lay, the bird may be removed from the nest and placed in a wire-based cage (with food and water). The wire base allows air to circulate freely underneath the bird. This 'cooling' effect is believed to bring the hen out of broodiness; however, the success of this method is low. Most hens eventually come out of broodiness on their own.

EGG DAMAGE

Some hens will damage their own and other birds' eggs, and this vice can be habit-forming. Various causes of egg damage have been proposed:

- Dietary insufficiency: egg damage is particularly prevalent when soft-shelled eggs are laid. In these cases, the calcium and vitamin D content of the diet should be assessed.
- Excess light in the nesting box.
- Too little space/overcrowding in the nesting boxes: sufficient nesting boxes should be provided.
- Height of the nesting boxes – it has been suggested that if the boxes are too low, eggs can be seen and attract the egg-damaging bird.
- Lack of foraging opportunity.

Some poultry keepers place dummy rubber/plastic eggs or golf balls as decoys to deter egg-damaging birds. Some keepers also drain the contents of an egg and fill the shell with dishwashing liquid as a deterrent.

ESCAPE

Escaping is not, in itself, a behavioural problem, although it may represent a management failure. In some cases, it may simply represent an inadequacy in enclosure design. As most poultry are territorial species, escape may represent the presence of stressors within the environment, such as:

- Male-male competition and/or aggression
- Dispersal of young male birds
- Presence of an aggressive hen
- Inadequate food and/or foraging opportunities
- Presence of potential predators or vermin
- Inadequate space within the enclosure

Most escapes can be prevented by using fully enclosed pens and/or wing clipping. By providing for the birds' behavioural needs, it allows for the better fulfilment of the Five Freedoms.

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QUESTION 1

Which of the following is unlikely to improve behavioural disorders?

a. Introduction of new birds into the flock
b. Providing additional space
c. Increasing foraging opportunities
d. Establishing a routine
e. Increasing feeding and watering stations

QUESTION 2

You examine a young bird with new feather growth behind the head as well as broken feathers on the dorsum above the tail. The bird is otherwise well. What is the most likely cause of the abnormal feathering?

a. Physiological moult
b. Feather destruction by other birds
c. Vent pecking
d. Head pecking
e. Ectoparasites

QUESTION 3

You examine a young bird with feather loss around the vent with bleeding wounds. The bird is otherwise well. What is the most likely cause?

a. Physiological moult
b. Feather destruction by other birds
c. Vent pecking
d. Head pecking
e. Ectoparasites

QUESTION 4

A hen has been identified as a chronic foreign body eater. Why should she not rear her own chicks?

a. They have poor mothering abilities.
b. She may cannibalise her chicks.
c. The stress of chick rearing worsens the disorder.
d. As it is a learned behaviour, the chicks may also develop the disorder.
e. Broody hens cannot forage, thereby worsening the disorder.

QUESTION 5

What can be done to reduce cockerel crowing?

a. Anti-crow collars
b. Dark overnight accommodation
c. Deslorelin implants
d. Soundproof coops
e. All of the above

QUESTION 6

You examine a middle-aged hen belonging to Mrs Smith with deep wounds on both flanks. What is the likely cause?

a. Spur damage from a cockerel
b. Fighting with other birds
c. Vermin attack
d. Ectoparasites
e. Escaping under a fence

QUESTION 7

You treat the wounds of Mrs Smith's hen and ask her to bring in her cockerel (she only has one). You trim and file his spurs sufficiently. After some time, Mrs Smith says the problem is recurring. She is reluctant to cull her cockerel. What else could she try?

a. Get an additional cockerel.
b. Using a 'saddle' on the hens
c. Pinion the cockerel
d. Allow extra foraging opportunities
e. Devoicing

QUESTION 8

Mrs Sprout's hen goes broody. She does not want any more chickens and cannot seem to break the broodiness. She bought some rubber eggs from the Crazy Store and placed them under the hen. When can she remove the eggs and replace the hen with her flock?

a. 21 days
b. 24 days
c. 28 days
d. 15 days
e. 40 days

QUESTION 9

Which of the following is not a contributing factor to egg damage in hens?

a. Dietary insufficiency
b. Overcrowding
c. Nesting boxes that are too low
d. Dark nesting boxes
e. Lack of foraging opportunities

QUESTION 10

Which of the following may cause a bird to escape its enclosure/territory?

a. Aggression between birds
b. Dispersal of young birds
c. Inadequate foraging opportunities
d. Presence of vermin
e. All of the above

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