

Catching and Handling Chickens

Our topics for this week are:

- **Capture of chickens**
- **Restraint and handling of chickens**
- **Removal and replacement of chickens in cages**

Chickens that are handled early in life and frequently as adults will offer no resistance nor appear distressed when gently handled. Those in large groups and having little to no experience being handled in the past will pile on top of each other in a corner resulting in injuries and death. If caught, they will flap their wings and scratch trying to free themselves.

Those chickens that are handled on a regular basis will come eat grain from a handler's hand and can be easily picked up by grasping them on both sides of their body and restraining their wings next to their body. The wings should not be held tightly enough to impair the chicken's respirations. Unlike mammals which have a diaphragm,, birds must be able to expand and compress their thorax to breathe.

Untrained chickens may be captured by hand while in a small enclosure or after a small group is herded to a corner of their enclosure using a folding mesh wire panel. Each panel unit should be 2 ft wide and 3 to 4 ft high for adult chickens. The handler should pin the group close enough together that they have just enough room to stand. If piling on top of each other occurs, more room should be provided. If a small enclosure is not available or the bird is on free range, a capture net can be used. Nets can be used on other poultry too, but the net should be the appropriate size for the bird, have a useful handle length, and possess a padded rim.

If the time of day is not important for the capture, all poultry can be caught more easily in an environment of subdued or blue light. Waiting until evening when they are roosting may be least stressful time to capture chickens. Placing a cloth over a restrained chicken's head can simulate nighttime and calm the bird.

When capturing a chicken, the wings and body are grasped with both hands at the same time to immobilize the wings. The grip should be firm enough to provide restraint, but care must be taken not to impede the respiratory movements of the chest. Capture should be as quiet and smooth as possible to avoid upsetting the rest of the flock. The chicken must be held firmly since, if untrained, there will be repeated attempts to escape after periods of rest. The body should always be supported during restraint and chickens should not be carried only by the legs due to risk of injury to the bird. During a release, the handler should return the bird to the ground or floor gently. The bird should not be dropped to the floor.

Restraint of a poult can be done with one hand over its back, making a ring around its neck with thumb and forefinger, while supporting the body by loosely wrapping the other 3 fingers around its body and trapping the legs between the ring and small fingers.

Birds older than 13 weeks should be carried by both wings and both legs. All poultry should never be held by the head, one wing, or one leg. The result will be injury to the bird and possible injury to the handler from the bird struggling with panic. The panic will also spread through the rest of the flock. Grabbing chickens by the leg and holding them upside down increases the risk of injury. Being returned to a flock with an injury could result in the bird being attacked by other members of the flock. Chickens from battery cages are more likely to have demineralized bone from the lack of exercise and fractures may result from being restrained by the legs.

To remove a chicken from a cage, the handler should reach in and pin the body down and then turn its head toward the cage door. While keeping the hand on top of the bird, the handler should then slide the other hand underneath the bird to grasp the legs, with the index finger between the legs and the thumb just above the hock on one side, and the other fingers above the hock on the other side. The leg tendons are squeezed to extend the legs backward. Using both hands, the bird is removed from the cage head first. The chicken can be carried in the same position with its head between the handlers arm and body. To return the bird to a cage, it is rotated in the handler's hands and placed in the cage head first and placed on its feet.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Chickens can be trained to approach handlers with food and tolerate being caught and handled gently.**
- 2. When capturing chickens or any other bird, do not press on their chest to handle or restrain them.**
- 3. Never carry chickens by just holding their legs.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.