

Approaching, Catching, and Routine Handling of Small Poultry

Our topics for this week are catching and handling chickens, turkeys, guinea fowl, ducks, and geese.

Prairie and Woodland Fowl

Chickens

Chickens that are handled early in life and frequently as adults will offer no resistance or experience stress 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 itself.

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. They should not be held tightly enough to impair their respiration.

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 pins 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 net can be used. Nets can be used on other poultry too, but the net should be the appropriate size for the bird including handle length, and have 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 and capturing them may be least stressful to the chickens. Placing a cloth over a restrained chicken's head can simulate darkness 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 with loosely wrapping the other 3 fingers around its body and trapping the legs between the ring and small finger.

Birds older than 13 weeks should be carried by both wings and both legs. They should be placed on their feet when releasing them. Grabbing chickens by the leg and holding them upside down increases the risk of injury. If returned with an injury to a flock could result in 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, which is a common method of holding and moving chickens in commercial operations.

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.

When removing or returning a chicken to a cage, the chicken should be moved head first. To remove a chicken from a cage, the handler should reach in, over the body, and grasp the body and wing on the far side and pull the chicken toward the cage door while moving its head toward the door and grasp under the bird's body and the wing with a thumb. The bird is removed from the cage head first. The handler should then slide a hand restraining the wing with the thumb underneath the bird and pointed backwards 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.

Guineafowl

Guineafowl are approached, captured, and handled in the same manner as chickens.

Turkeys

The handler should herd 10 or less turkeys into a catch pen with a hurdle in the same manner as chickens. The turkey to be captured is approached from behind. The handler kneels and grasps a wing where it joins the body and the legs between the hocks and the feet, holding the hocks straight and then place the turkey's breast on a platform, such as a bale of straw. If no platform is present, the breast can be rested on the handler's knee. A mature bird, which may weigh over 50 lb, should be lifted from a handler's kneeling position with his legs and a straight back to reduce the risk of back injury. Turkeys can be carried by a handler with one arm, holding the legs with one hand and wrapping the arm around the bird's body with the head directed behind the handler.

Domestic turkey hens are generally docile, but toms can be aggressive and should be watched more closely when a handler is in a pen with one. Male turkeys normally have a pale or blue colored head. Aggressiveness may be signaled by the fleshy parts of the head becoming engorged with blood and red-colored.

Waterfowl

The trachea of birds has complete cartilagenous rings and can withstand more compression than the trachea of mammals. Waterfowl, geese and ducks, have long necks can be safely captured for restraint by grasping their necks and then their wings and feet. Compression on their chest must be mild to avoid inhibiting their breathing.

Ducks

The handler grasps the duck's neck from behind without pressing on the trachea and esophagus in front. While pulling the duck upward, the wings are grasped near the attachment with the body with the other hand. The hand on the neck is then moved beneath the body to support the duck's body weight. The chest, abdomen, or legs should not be restrained. A second method is to grasp the neck and then tuck the body under the other arm and against the handler's side. A third method is to grasp both wings at their base and put the other hand under the duck's body to support its weight.

The release from being held should be with a sliding movement near the ground as if the

duck is landing on water so the feet will extend and support the body.

Ducks are nocturnal feeders and have excellent night vision. Dimming lights in handling room is not effective in reducing their reactivity.

Geese

Geese can usually be captured after herding into a small enclosure. They walk slowly and should not be hurried or they will become panicked and stressed. If a catch pen is not available a neck crook can be used (do not use a crook on their legs) or an appropriate size and constructed net may be used. However, too many geese into the enclosure at one time can cause piling and suffocation might result. A handler should remain mindful that geese can cause painful blows with their wings and deep scratches with their feet.

To capture a goose, a handler grasps its neck and then the base of the wings. Both wings can be held with one hand. The goose can be picked up while the handler maintains his grasp on the neck, just below the goose's head, or the goose may peck at the handler's face.

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

- 1. A handler should carry small poultry by supporting their body, while restraining its wings. The legs of chickens, guineafowl, and turkeys should also be restrained. Never restrain poultry by only the neck or feet.**
- 2. Ducks and geese are captured by the neck from behind.**
- 3. Geese may bite, scratch, and inflict blows with their wings.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

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.