

The Natural Behaviors of Poultry

All poultry are highly social and disturbed by isolation. Strange birds of the same species added suddenly to an established group will be attacked and either injured or killed.

Daily Activities

Normal behavior of unstressed adult poultry with sufficient room for exercise includes wing-flapping, feather ruffling, leg stretching, and dust-bathing. In their natural environments, poultry spend nearly all their waking time foraging for food by pecking seeds, leaves, berries, worms, larvae, and insects to eat, picking up sand and gravel for their gizzards, or investigating their surroundings. Foraging for food provides the vast majority of their mental enrichment. Dust bathing occurs in the middle of the day several times per week. Areas with trees are preferred by small poultry to be used for roosting at night.

Defenses

The primary means of defense for most poultry is hiding in brush. Flying, vocalizing, pecking, clawing, and beating of wings are secondary defenses. Due to the danger from predators, females prefer to hide to lay eggs, and young birds are closely bound to wherever their mother goes. Young poultry with prominent keel bones and large pectoral muscles such as some domestic chickens, turkeys, and ducks are capable of flying short distances and will perch or climb onto elevated resting spots.

Behavior Caused by Close Confinement

Most chickens and turkeys are raised commercially in high density confinement. Aggressiveness is enhanced by overcrowding. In these environments, birds do not have the opportunity to forage and receive the mental stimulation it provides. Head pecking of submissive or injured birds can be brutal and eventually kill the new member of the flock. Feather pecking is also common in poultry confined on metal or concrete surfaces.

Behaviors of Less Common Poultry

Guineafowl stay in close groups and are ravenous foragers as they eat flying and crawling insects, ticks, worms, grubs, and snails. They will surround and attack small rodents, marauding birds, and snakes. They sleep in trees at night. Ducks and geese get natural exercise by paddling through water. It is important for them to have sufficient water to immerse their bill and eyes to clean their face.

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. The natural behavior of poultry is to forage for food nearly all day.**
- 2. Hiding in brush is the major means of defense for most poultry. Being in or near brush rather in open spaces lowers stress in poultry.**
- 3. The natural behavior of poultry and mental enrichment is not suited for extreme confinement.**

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.