

Lucky Hens Rescue

Moulting Help Sheet

During autumn, many household poultry keepers, particularly people keeping poultry for the first time, are puzzled because egg production markedly declines or ceases despite their laying birds appearing healthy. This seasonal decline in egg production occurs when birds go into a condition known as the 'moult'.

Moulting is the process of shedding and renewing feathers

During the moult, the reproductive physiology of the bird has a complete rest from laying and the bird builds up its body reserves of nutrients. The provision of new feathers or a coat (a feature inherent in most animals) is a natural process, designed by nature to maintain a bird's ability to escape enemies by flight and better protect against cold winter conditions. Under usual conditions, adult birds moult once a year. Some may moult twice in one year and, rarely, once in two years.

The Laying Hen

Mature birds normally undergo one complete moult a year, usually in autumn. However, this can depend on the time of the year that the bird started laying. Natural moulting usually begins sometime during September/October and should be completed by Jan/Feb when egg production recommences. The three main factors that bring about moulting are:

- Physical exhaustion and fatigue
- Completion of the laying cycle (as birds lay eggs for a certain period of time)
- Reduction of the day length, resulting in reduced feeding time and consequent loss of body weight

Eleven months of continuous production is expected from pullets hatched in season. So if a flock of pullets commences laying in March at six months of age, they should continue laying until the following February, although an occasional bird may moult after laying for a few weeks. However, these few birds should begin laying again after June and continue in production until the following autumn.

Pullets coming into lay in June should lay until the following April, giving 11 months of continuous egg production without the aid of artificial light. Ex-Caged Hens, are put under artificial light, some times every 10 weeks, so the seasons can be all over the place as such!

Moulting And Nutrition

If a bird stops laying and moulting, this means its physical condition is deteriorating and, therefore, cannot support egg production, continued nourishment of their feathers or body maintenance. Feathers contain protein and are more easily grown when laying ceases because of the difficulty in assimilating sufficient protein for both egg and feather production. During the moult, the fowl still needs a considerable amount of good quality food to replace feathers and build up condition.

Good Layers And Moulting

The time at which a laying hen ceases production and goes into moult is a reliable guide as to whether or not the hen is a good egg producer. Poor producing hens moult early (November-December), and take a long time to complete the process and resume laying i.e. they 'hang' in the moult and are out of production for six to seven months. Poor producers seldom cast more than a few feathers at a time and rarely show bare patches.

High-producing hens moult late and for a short period (no more than 12 weeks), and come back into production very quickly. Rapid moulting is seen not only in the wing feathers of good producers, but also in the loss of body feathers generally. Because of this, it is common to see a late and rapid moulting hen practically devoid of feathers and showing many bare patches over its body.

Stress Factors and Moulting

Natural moults can occur any time of the year if birds are subjected to stress. A bird becomes stressed when the environment or management presents a challenge to which the bird cannot respond without suffering a harmful effect. If a hen is subjected to a mild stress condition in late spring when in full production, she will suffer a drop in egg production; whereas, if a hen is subjected to the same stress condition in autumn, it will cease laying and moult.

Before you print think about the ENVIRONMENT!