

Bathing and Grooming your Chicken

By APA-ABA Youth Program
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Never, never, never take a dirty bird to a show. Dirty birds don't win.....they don't even get as far as champion row. The next time you are at a show or a fair, take the time to look at the birds. Really look at them, stand back and see if you can see what the judge sees. Why did the judge place one bird over the other? In some larger shows, the placement can be very close and the difference between your bird being placed on champion row and one that is left in the cage, can come down to it being clean and well groomed.

Getting your bird "show ready" is not a big secret that only the top breeders know. Not only is it easy to do, but also your bird will actually enjoy its bath.

Bathing is done 3 to 5 days before the show. This allows time for the bird to dry completely and to work some of the natural oil back into the feathers. Grooming starts at bath time with the trimming of the nails and the beak, and the final, last minute touch-ups take place after your bird is in the show cage and just prior to the judging.

Gather your supplies and place them within ease reach. This list is simple and basic. Of course, you can be more elaborate if you wish, but I have found that the basic method works well. List: 3 Washtubs, shampoo, vinegar, hair conditioner, towels, old toothbrush, dog nail clippers, blow dryer, a small sponge and a clean carrier or cage for drying. Some of the extras that you might want to have on hand are: an emery board for making smooth nail and beak trims and blood stop in case you cut the nail too short.

Start with the three tubs of warm water. The tubs should be large enough to give you plenty of water and room for a good bath. Don't try and bathe a large fowl bird in a small plastic bucket. It just won't work. Use washtubs in the laundry room. The #1 tub is used for the bath while the #2 and the #3 tubs are used for rinsing. Put about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup vinegar for every gallon of water in the #2 tub add about 1 tablespoon of hair conditioner for every gallon of water in the #3 tub. Holding your bird with its breast resting in your palm, lower it into the first tub allowing a few seconds for the bird to realize what is happening. Most birds will relax and some will even go to sleep during their bath. This really happens, so keep a watch on your bird do their head does not go under the water. Put some shampoo on the dirtiest part of your bird first. This is usually the vent area, the legs and the feet. While these parts are soaking, shampoo the rest of the bird slowly and gently, being careful that you do not damage the feathers by rubbing them backwards.

Take your time and do a good job. Rinse as much of the shampoo out of the feathers as you can in the #1 tub and then place the bird in the #2 tub with the vinegar. Rinse, rinse, rinse.....the vinegar will help but you may need to rinse again. Make sure there is no shampoo left in the feathers because this makes for a mess when it dries. (Think of drying your hair with shampoo left in.)

Next, wrap the bird in a towel leaving the head out of one end and the feet sticking out of the other. (Think egg roll.) This will help dry the bird and keep it still so you can clean its head, legs and feet. While wrapped, you wash the face, wattles and comb with the sponge. Trim the top beak so that it is even with the bottom and use the emery board to smooth the edges. After a good bath and a good face washing, it's time for a good pedicure. Using the old toothbrush, give the legs, feet and toenails a scrubbing. Make sure you remove any old "poo" that is under the nails as judges do notice. You may need to use soap to do a complete job. Rinse them well under running water. Now clip the nails. It is easier to clip nails once they have softened in the water and are clean. Be careful not to trim too short as they have a vein that runs down through the toe and into the toenail, and clipping into this vein will cause them to bleed. This is usually not serious but it can bleed and remember you have just bathed your bird and you do not want to get blood on the feathers. The vein is fairly easy to see in birds with white toenails but on dark ones, you may have to look under the nail to see where the vein stops. If you cannot see the vein, clip small portions of the nail at a time checking after each clip. If the nail does bleed, use the blood stop and a cotton ball to control the bleeding.

Now you can put your bird in the clean cage or carrier to dry. While all birds can be air dried in a warm environment (not in the sun or in front of a heater), loose feathered birds such as Cochins, Silkies and Orpingtons will benefit from drying with a blow dryer, while tightly feathered birds such as Old English, Modern Game, do better drying on their own.

You are now ready to take your bird to the show. Transport it in a carrier with smooth sides to protect the feathers that you worked so hard to clean.

You will need a grooming box (Small tackle box or 5 gal bucket) stocked with your grooming supplies. Here is the basic list: Baby Oil to put a shine on the shank, feet, comb, beak and wattles of the bird, blood stop in case you need to stop bleeding from anything, old toothbrush for cleaning toenails, wet wipes are good for everything, antibiotic ointment to use on combs or wattles that are scratched and bleeding, silk cloth for wiping feathers and putting a shine on the bird.

After cooping in your bird at the show and about 30 minutes or so before judging begins, do you last minute grooming. Start with the feet and legs by wiping them with the baby wipes and then putting on a little baby oil for shine. Check the vent area for any "poo" that might be on the feathers and clean them with the wipes. Check the head and decide if you want to put baby oil on the comb and wattles or if antibiotic ointment would be better. Either way, rub it in well so it produces a nice shine. Now use your silk cloth and rub your bird from head to tail several times.....20 is good but 50 is better. The bird will enjoy this and you will see those feathers begin to really shine. Gently place the bird back into the coop as not to disturb those beautiful feathers. As you attend more shows, you will see other breeders groom their birds and you will learn more techniques and see other products used on birds. You can learn much from other breeders and you may want to try some of what you learn. Remember, never do anything to your bird or use anything on your bird that might harm it in anyway.

Now you can walk away knowing you have done a beautiful job and that your bird looks its best.