

A COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO BREEDING BIRDS TO THE STANDARDS OF PERFECTION

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Raising birds that match the Standard of Perfection is the goal of every poultry breeder. But how does one reach that goal?

Accomplished exhibitors have written many books and articles, and it would be worthwhile to read study and learn from the masters.

This condensed and simplified version can be used as a guide for inexperienced or beginning breeders of poultry. It is meant to be practical, easy to understand and easy to implement when one is breeding birds to match the Standards.

When you are breeding birds to the Standards, you must know what the perfect bird would look like. I have found that making a copy of the picture of bird from the standard and enlarging it to a 8 X 10, and then taking a picture of your birds and enlarging them to the same size will help you see where your birds match the standard, and also where they may be lacking. If you still have trouble, try tracing the outline of your birds onto a plastic overlay and then placing that on top of the Standard picture. This will allow you to see your bird as a judge sees it when they compare it to the Standards. Is the tail angle correct, is the head held high enough, is the back the correct shape and length? These are questions that must be answered truthfully before a breeding pen can be set up.

Some exhibitors use incubators to hatch their chicks, and some use broody hens. Both have some advantages. Incubators hatch eggs on your schedule and you can always hatch so many more, but hen-hatched chicks seem to be stronger and have a longer lifespan.

Penning your breeders together will do no good if the hens are not laying eggs. Many show birds lay fewer eggs than we would like and they never seem to lay on our schedule. Start your breeders off right by making sure they are worm, parasite, and disease free. You can encourage them by providing at least 12 hours of light, feeding them with a good layer feed and providing some type of green feed. New nesting materials will cause the females to explore them and this seems to encourage some. But, in general, exhibition birds do not lay nearly as well as production birds. Be happy with the number of eggs you get and do your best to hatch them.

A breeder can match one male with up to ten females. Before deciding on how you will proceed, you will need to consider several things. To be positive of the "parentage" of your chicks, you will need to mate one male with one female, carefully mark your eggs, and set them on a day that is different from the rest so that the hatch day is different. Then you will need to identify your chicks in some way such as toe punching or banding.

If the goal is to hatch as many chicks as possible or if your pens will not accommodate several males, then matching one male with several hens is the way to accomplish this.

Usually you will want to mate your most perfect birds in the hopes that their offspring will be more perfect than either parent. But that does not always work because all birds have shortcomings, or faults. A bird with a minor fault can be matched to one that does not have that fault, and hopefully the mating will produce offspring that is more perfect than either parent. Results from both of these types of matings can produce great results. But, occasionally, the results are disappointing, and the entire hatching season can be wasted. Spend time with your birds. The time invested in doing this is well-spent. You will learn your birds: their strengths, weaknesses, and defects. As an added bonus, the birds will be more gentle and comfortable around people.

There are several common and costly mistakes that many inexperienced breeders make. The first is not hatching enough birds and not culling, which means killing the bird. I mention these together because they go together. Hatching only 3 or 4 birds many times will result in each chick being raised, even the ones that have serious defects or even qualities for disqualifications. The reasoning behind this is that these are the only birds that they have. Hatching more birds gives the breeder options. Culling should start at the incubator. Chicks that are too weak to hatch usually have a foot problem and should be destroyed by dropping the un-hatched chick in a container of water. Weak chicks usually live only a day or two. Every month, the growing birds should be looked at closely and when it is clear that the bird has any disqualification, such as the wrong comb type, it should be destroyed. While this may sound harsh, remember that at this time you are only culling disqualified birds so to give these birds away, to sell them at auction or worse, sell them to children, only serves to have disqualified birds that could end up being used for breeding or showing.

Culling is difficult for many so if there is any question as to whether the chick is worth keeping, nothing is lost by keeping it until the next checking time. Do not cull too early, as all birds go through that “lanky teenage” look and will look totally different within a few months when they reach adulthood.

As they reach adulthood, you should have a beautiful group of birds with no disqualifications and very few defects. If you have too many, sell your excess. What could make a breeder any happier than seeing one of his/her birds on champion row? Remember if you sell a bird that ends up on champion row, it is a double win for you; you, the breeder, win, and the exhibitor also wins. You will soon be known for the quality of the birds that you sell and your birds will be sought after.

If you are serious about breeding excellent birds, banding is essential to identification. Banding alone is worthless without a written record. Keeping good records of each mating and the resulting hatch is not only important, but it is timesaving. If you know the parents of your winning birds, you can almost always produce winning birds again from the same mating. These records make setting up breed pens year after year so much easier. While there are many ways to accomplish this, from the old-fashioned paper and pencil to a computer spread sheet, it is important that you choose one that works best for you and that you use it consistently. Within 3-4 years of record keeping, you will be able to set up your breed pens from the record and have great success.

Breeding birds involves study, time and work. It should also be fun and enjoyable. There is nothing quite like seeing a bird that you bred and raised on champion row and knowing that you made it happen.