Household Poultry: Culling the Laying Pen—Preparing Table Birds for Cooking—Preserving Eggs—Progress of Pullet Rearing

APART from the important working principle that all poultry keepers should regularly cull out poorly-producing pullets and hens, the approach of Christmas makes appropriate a discussion of the way to go about quitting birds no longer profitable and how to kill, pluck, and clean them for consumption. Thought must also be given to the new generation of birds to replace those killed off, and to the period between the time when the old fowls finish laying and the new pullets begin so that provision can be made for eggs during that interval. Advice on these subjects is given in this month's article for the household poultry keeper by W. L. McIver, Poultry Instructor, Department of Agriculture, Hamilton.

FIRST, the difference between hens and pullets must be understood, as one expression should not be used automatically to include the other. A pullet is a female bird which has not completed its first year of laying and has not gone into a major moult. Sometimes pullets moult partially, around the neck, or even entirely during winter when they are 10 or 11 months old, but that does not remove them from the pullet classification. Almost without exception fowls moult fully after about 12 months in production and have about 3 months' spell. They are then hens and, though at this stage they are about 18 months old, for the next 12 months they are called first-year hens. A year later they become second-year hens. In December the average first-year hen is 2 years 3 months old and a second-year hen is 3 years 3 months old; a bird hatched in September, 1948, and now 1 year 3 months old is still a pullet.

The importance of this distinction between pullets and hens lies in the fact that almost all birds lay fewer eggs in their first hen year than in their pullet year and fewer still in their second hen year. This fact must be taken into account when culling out poor or non-producers.

Culling the Laying Pen

The length of time for which a laying bird should be kept cannot be defined in terms of months or years, and the general standard of 2 years implies only a very broad principle. Some pullets are uneconomic after 4 or 6 months' laying, and some hens are good for several years. Each bird should be judged on its merits and poor layers discarded promptly. Looking on hens as household pets is not the correct attitude. Certainly, they should be treated kindly and all possible consideration given to their welfare, but they are in the laying pen for only one purpose—to produce eggs. Irrespective of age, a bird which is not doing its duty should be culled out.

Observation, a little knowledge of laying characteristics, and comparatively little practice will soon enable anyone to do his own culling, especially with White Leghorns, which show plainly discernible signs which are not so apparent in heavy-breed strains. If only a few birds are kept, the owner usually knows each pullet and hen as an individual and observation gives him an opportunity of knowing the dependable layers and suspecting the poor ones. Having formed an opinion of their merits from day-by-day observation, he can then judge the birds by taking account of the time of year and a comparison of the important signs. December comes at the end of a flush laying period and it can now be expected that some pullets and a few hens should go off the lay. In January still more will do so, and even greater declines can be expected during February and March. Up to the middle of February non-producers should be culled out immediately and, if there will be enough housing for some of the birds for another year, those which continue to lay later than mid-February should be selected.

The comb of a good layer has a moist, fresh apearance and obviously is served by a good supply of blood; this indicates that the ovary is active. The non-layer has a smaller, dried up, shrivelled comb. Experience soon permits the judging of stages between, mainly by comparing the bird under observation with the average flock member; if it has different unfavourable characteristics from the others, that is evidence against it.

The layer has soft, pliable pelvic bones on each side of the vent, with a space between them of the width of two fingers or more. In the non-layer those bones are close together, hard to the touch, and, if the bird has been off the lay, covered with fat. Frequent handling and comparison soon teach the meanings of exterior signs. The space between the pelvic bones of heavy-breed and cross-breed strains is not as wide as in light breeds when the birds are in moderate lay. This might cause some to be adjudged non-layers, but the best way to gain experience is the hard way of making a few mistakes, which show up when the ovary is examined after the bird has been gutted for cooking.

Yellow-legged varieties, which include White Leghorns, have the further feature of leg colouring as a guide. Soon after beginning to lay Leghorns start to lose the yellow colour and go pale in the shanks. The colour does not return until after they have stopped laying. If a few birds show leg colour when all the rest do not, that is sufficient evidence to warrant picking them up and handling them for the other signs of non-laying.

The next step is to judge whether the bird is off the lay because it is a poor producer or because it is failing in health. The best guide is body condition: If the bird is well fleshed on the breast, keel, and legs, it can be classed as an uneconomic layer and reserved for table use, but if it is thin and in poor condition generally, it should be buried. If there is doubt, the bird may be plucked and cleaned and the internal organs, especially the liver, examined; if they are in proper condition, the fowl is fit for consumption.

Ailing pullets and hens are a danger to their flock mates and should not be kept. Even if a sick bird recovers, it causes such a loss by decline in egg production that as a rule it cannot make up the leeway and the value of the food eaten while off the lay. Obviously-sick birds cannot be shown sympathy.

An article in this series in the "Journal" for March, 1949, gave advice on points to be looked for in selecting fowls suitable for breeding.

Preparing Table Birds for Cooking

Few householders have proper facilities for fattening hens, but a small coop can be built and nailed to one of the inside walls of the laying house. Most non-layers will already be fat enough for immediate killing, but an early moulter might be a little low in condition. Such birds may be kept in the coop so that they remain inactive, fed amply, and given easily-digested food. Usually it is not advisable to waste much time or food on fattening culls, especially if costly foodstuffs are used.

Far too many household hens are left alive because the owners do not know how to kill, pluck, and clean the culls and think the job is disagreeable, but the whole procedure is really very simple. If the bird is killed by the neck-dislocation method, it will bleed without trouble. A demonstration should be sought, as it is easier to follow than a written description.

Dry plucking is rather slow and difficult for the amateur. Wet plucking is easier, especially if the bird is to be cooked within 24 hours or so. Most people when dipping a fowl in hot water before plucking it either leave it in too long, thus softening the flesh and causing the skin to tear, or have the water too cool, so that little advantage is obtained. With an older fowl it is better to have the water close to boiling point, but to submerge the bird for the minimum of time. The water should be brought to the boil, a little cold water added, and the fowl dipped for only 20 to 25 seconds. Pulling a single wing feather shows whether the bird has been dipped adequately; if it comes out easily, the scalding has been sufficient. The work should be hurried on with after the bird has been given a shake to throw off the surplus water, which otherwise would leave the feathers too hot to be handled. The wing feathers should be plucked first, the