Household Poultry Keepers Need Proper Henhouse Equipment

POOR as is the standard of the average backyard henhouse, it is better than the equipment in most household poultry runs. The great majority of backyarders make inadequate provision for working equipment and most of their henhouse fittings are makeshift, unsatisfactory, unsightly, and in need of repair. In this month's article for the household poultry keeper W. L. McIver, Poultry Instructor, Department of Agriculture, Hamilton, contends that, even if the fowls do not object to this state of affairs, the owners should consider their own comfort and convenience and should show some pride in maintaining the birds properly.

SUCCESS in poultry keeping is the result of a combination of good housing, proper management, and high-quality stock. Some people rate the stock as first in importance, but these three essentials have been placed deliberately in the order given. Excellent stock can be ruined by poor management, so to that extent management is more important than the strain of fowl, though even the best of management cannot make up for the deficiencies of inferior stock. Further, good management can undo only some of the harms caused by unsuitable or unsatisfactory housing; management which permits fowls to live in such housing is not good, so housing is of foremost importance.

Just as good management does not begin and end with feeding, so does housing imply more than accommodation. Included in the housing must be all the fittings and equipment necessary for the comfort of the birds and the convenience of the owner. Both aspects are important, because the most economic unit is that showing the best return for the least work.

As the general standard of household poultry accommodation and equipment is so deplorably low, here is some advice about features which frequently are neglected:—

Doors

Make the doors high, wide enough for a barrow to go through readily, and strong, especially the hinges. Do not build the outside door right down to floor level, but only to litter level, even though that does necessitate stepping over a barrier board when going in and out.

Perches

Plan the perches as one of the most important pieces of equipment in the house. Use high-quality, dressed timber, free from bark, cracks, and knotholes. An easy way to arrange perches is to rest them on two cross-bars suspended from the rafters by wires, like trapezes. To reduce swaying fix wire hooks to the bars and drive staples into which they can fit into the rear wall. Do not nail the perches to the cross-bars, but drive 4in. nails on each side of each perch so that the projecting heads stop them from moving. Directly under the perches and between the 4in. nails drive 1in. nails in pairs into the bars and leave the heads sticking out ½in. to form an air space between the perches and the bars to counteract red mite. Creosote the perches and bars. If more than three rows of perches are needed to accommodate laying birds, the house is overcrowded. All perches should be on the same level.

Nests

Large and airy nests with provision for closing the entrances at night are best. Twelve fowls need only two nests 12in. wide, 14in. high, and 18in. from front to back, but more are necessary if the nests are smaller. Build them far enough above the floor to avoid the hens losing the floor space underneath, but not high enough to make it difficult for the birds to jump up to the opening; 18in. above litter level is high enough. Erect them in a dry, draught-free place which is not too well lit. Make them so that they can be dismantled easily for cleaning.

Drinkers

Drinking troughs need not be very deep or wide (5in. each way is sufficient), but should be long enough to allow several fowls to stand side by side and drink at the same time. The only satisfactory place for drinkers other than specially designed and expensive systems is outside the floor space of the house. Build out from one wall a niche rather like a nest box and place the troughs in it on a slatted floor to permit spilt water to fall outside the house.

Feed Troughs and Hoppers

There are many ways of making troughs and hoppers and several designs are satisfactory.

The chief point of design in a hopper is that it must not allow food to be wasted; if the fowls can scratch out any dry mash, they will not pick it up off the litter while they can get more from the hopper. Build the lip of the "saucer" 3in. higher than the base of the flow board which forms the front of the container. In turn this flow board base should be 3in. higher than the bottom of the hopper, making the height of the "saucer" 6in.

Whether a trough is V-shaped for wet mash or hopper-shaped for dry mash, adequate provision must be made for a number of fowls to feed at the same time. If wet mash is fed, all birds must be able to eat at once, but with dry-mash feeding the trough need be only big enough for a quarter of the birds at the same time. Troughs should be made so that they will not be fouled easily and can be cleaned readily.

Hoppers which can be divided into compartments are better than the drum or barrel type because provision can be made for the various items which should be available to the layers. The hopper should have small compartments for a mineral grit (such as oyster shell or lime), a hard grit (small, sharp, angular, road metal screenings), wheat, and meat meal; a large compartment should be reserved for dry mash.

Droppings Boards

To allow easy cleaning droppings boards must be carefully made, as the scraper will catch in any groove or projection. Flat asbestos sheeting has an excellent surface for cleaning. The boards should be cleaned daily.

Whether droppings boards are essential depends on circumstances. If the surrounding ground drainage is not good, they are necessary, but otherwise they can well be done without provided a proper and adequate floor litter is used.

Floor Litter

An inch or two of material on the floor is not adequate. A shallow litter can become moist too quickly and is difficult to dry out. Supplying 6 to 8in. of litter is also cheaper in the long run because it does not need changing as frequently as does a shallower layer. Put in 3 or 4in. of new litter at first and gradually add more until the depth is sufficient.

Materials which do not pack down hard are the best. A cheap and excellent litter is sawdust or wood shavings, or both. Dry garden soil can be added. If at least 6in. of litter is provided on well-drained flooring the litter need not be changed more frequently than once a year if the house is weather proof. Even then not all the old litter should be cleaned out; about a quarter or more should be left to enable the bacteria in the old litter to help break down the new litter.

Other Equipment

The essential items have been listed, but further equipment can ease the labour of keeping fowls. Have suitable bins or metal drums for food storage. Keep special buckets in which to carry food, a wide-mouthed box for droppings off the boards, a good type of droppings-board scraper, and a suitable basket for the eggs. Keep a catching hook in the shed so that birds can be caught for examination at any time.

Fowls cannot object actively to draughty, damp, dull, and sunless conditions; makeshift perches, nests, feeders, and drinkers; uncleaned droppings boards; fouled tops of nests, hoppers, ledges, and boxes; and rain beating in through walls and roofs; but their physical reactions will result in an objection in the form of a lower egg yield. Even if the owner is satisfied with fewer eggs, is not the comfort and convenience of the person managing the fowls of some importance? Many people refuse to keep a few fowls because of the alleged "tie", but if that disadvantage exists, it is usually caused by lack of equipment and failure to operate a suitable feeding system. Taking a pride in the hens and their housing and equipment is a factor likely to lead to success.