

## WINTER CARE OF COCHINS

by Matt McCammon, originally published in the January, 2012 Poultry Press

During the dark, cold winter season, it is natural for those of us who like to be outside and involved with our birds to get a bit cooped up, please pardon the pun! I have learned to enjoy this "down time" with the birds at this time of year. In this part of the country, the show season ends in early December and doesn't start again until early spring. So there are several months that can be used to prepare birds for the next show season. I thought I would include some of the things I do, or should do, during these winter months to ensure healthy birds through the winter. Then your birds will be ready for the spring show season and for the breeding pens.

The first thing I am careful of is to keep an eye out for sickness. Cochins aren't especially durable. So if you let a bird get too sick it is hard to get it over the hump. I find that the best thing is to go out in the evening, just after dark and stand in your building or buildings. Listen for gurgles or sneezes. Those sounds might not be noticeable during the daylight hours when birds are busier and crowing. When you hear these early sounds of sickness, you can mix up a little medicated water and give it to the birds. Usually they are not too sick to be off of food or water at this point, so they drink the medicine and get better quickly. So, as the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure in this case.

The second issue I pay close attention to is mites. In the winter, the birds often don't get outside and are more confined, often in warm areas. This is a perfect place for mites. We all know Cochins are magnets for mites. So look them over carefully near the vent and behind the comb and at the base of the neck. If your developing birds still have blood feathers growing on the neck, be careful to check there. It seems the mites will set up housekeeping there first. I don't know why mites like some birds over others. When you check you may notice that only one bird in a pen or line of pens has the mites. Others are clean. I still treat those on each side of the affected bird lightly so the mites don't travel to them.

The third issue follows closely on the heels of the mite issue, and it is clean your pens. My birds are always on corn cob bedding. I like it because I don't have to change it as often as shavings. In our moist, damp winter weather the shavings tend to wick the moisture. Since Cochins aren't exceptionally active scratchers and foragers, it seems the manure collects in wet piles in the middle of the cages. This is an invitation to mites and it leads to an unsightly bird that will be harder to prepare for show season. The corn cobs remain dry and easily movable, so the manure doesn't pile up and the bedding is never moist. Mice and other rodents may be attracted to your warm, grain filled buildings so keep an eye out for them and keep poison at hand.

The next issue deals with ventilation and will assist you in preventing those respiratory conditions and dusty pens. Keep your building ventilated. A warm building is not necessarily an air tight building. For loose feathered but profusely feathered birds like a Cochin, the absence of drafts is the best bet to keep them warm. I keep my windows cracked just a bit to allow air flow and to prevent dust from accumulating. If it gets extremely cold, I might shut the cracked windows overnight, but I always open them back again as soon as I can. My male birds are on solid bottom pens and the females are on the floor, so they don't have to worry about air flow underneath them.

In the winter, the worst part about caring for birds is the frozen water cups. I leave for work before daylight comes. So when it is extremely cold and the water in my cups freezes, which isn't nearly as often as those of you in areas farther north, I fill only half of the water cup at the evening feeding. Then there is still space to put water on top of the ice in the morning for the birds to get a good drink. I might keep the light on in the building for ten or fifteen minutes to allow them to get a good drink. Then I shut it off and go inside to warm myself. In the evening, I will remove all of the cups and pound the ice out or replace them with new ones if I don't have time to clean out the ice, and start the whole process over again. During a harsh winter I might only have to carry out this operation a total of three weeks or so, but sometimes longer. If I lived much farther north a heated building would be in my future!

Now that you have your birds well taken care of, you can stop and take a good look at them. Begin considering how well they placed at the fall shows if you have shown them before. Look over any notes you kept about their cage presence and how well judges may have liked them. Especially take time with your pullets and cockerels who might have not been shown yet. With the mottled variety, it doesn't do one much good to show pullets and cockerels, so birds are at least a year old before they see a show hall. That doesn't mean they are that old before they see a show cage! Give them a chance to feel comfortable in a show coop and see how they respond to your handling them as a judge would. The birds that catch your eye should be noted and further checks can be performed to see if that is a good spring show season prospect. I am always running my poultry operation on a shoe string budget and am naturally a frugal person, so I like to find cheap and easy ways to take care of my birds. I use color coded clothes pins. I put the pins on the cage and move it around periodically as an indicator of how well a bird impressed me. If the pin doesn't move, then the bird didn't move me, so to speak. If I move it down the wire on the cage, the bird is looking better and better each time I examine it. I am sure others have ways that work for them, but it is a quick, easy, and inexpensive way to assess a row of cockerels or pullets.

Now that you know which birds are catching your eye, you can begin considering setting up your breeding pens. How many will you have, and how much room do you have for chicks this year? Nothing negates the potential of a developing chick more than overcrowding. So plan and consider what is best. I would rather raise 25 very nice birds with plenty of room to mature and grow than to have 100 chicks crowded in a brooder and spreading every sickness to each other. The obvious goal of any breeding pen is to produce birds better than the parents and closer to the standard of perfection. So don't match birds with like faults. Most of us know all of that, but I want to add to that fault the size factor. It has been my humble opinion that Cochin bantams have been slowly becoming too big for about a decade now. Whether that size is flesh or feather mass isn't the point. Breeding big birds will produce big birds. So get out the scale, keep old standard and Schilling photos handy, and use the common sense the good Lord gave you to plan a few matings that will show some promise. I have heard a lot of complaints about judges placing big birds at the tops of classes. To this I say it is important for those of us who agree to offer a good, typey alternative to those big birds. If all the judge sees in the major varieties is oversized birds, what choice does he have? If there are good birds of medium size and good Cochin SHAPE in the class and the judge ignores them, that is just poor judging. Sometimes that occurs also. No one is perfect and there are so many breeds and varieties to know and remember that I can't expect a judge to be an expert on every one. So it occurs to



me that the winter months are not the "down time" I thought they were! A good dedicated breeder and fancier knows that winter care of his/her Cochins is paramount to a good spring show and breeding season. Keep your buildings clean and comfortable and you will enjoy spending time out there too. The more you get to know your birds the more they will get to know you. You will learn their strengths and weaknesses. The more informed you are the better your results will be, whether you strive to attain a starred win or just one more hatch growing its way to an increased level of attainment on the standard of perfection. Either one is rewarding, and when the win occurs because of all your own hard work and breeding, it is worth all those winter-time chores!

