

REARING BROILERS ON PASTURE

Series, part three: This publication is part of a four-part series on pastured poultry (Publications 196-00—196-03) dealing primarily with broilers although the material is applicable layers. Written by James McNitt, Ph.D., professor, animal science and Lonnie Parker, research farm manager II.

Rearing birds on pasture requires an easily movable pen or fence. The enclosure should provide protection from flying, four-legged, and two-legged predators, including, hawks, eagles, dogs, raccoons, skunks, and humans). There also should be good protection from sun, cold or damp weather, and other environmental factors that might interfere with their growth and production. The housing units should allow for easy care for the birds. If it is difficult to properly care for birds, the tendency will be to let some things slide which may interfere with their survival and growth. There are two basic methods of housing pastured birds: the Salatin style pen and the day range model.

SALATIN METHOD

The Salatin method, named after Joel Statin who developed the technique, is a light-weight pen that will house 50 -100 birds. We allow about 1.3 square feet for each bird, so an 8' x 8' pen will be adequate for about 50 birds; a 10' x 12' pen will house 92 birds. These pens are about 18" high and are framed with wood, PVC pipe, cattle panels or other suitable materials. The pens will be dragged by hand one pen length each day so it is important to be sure they are light enough to handle easily, but heavy enough to not be blown away by the wind.

Advantages

- It is inexpensive to get started.
- The pen will probably cost less than \$100. Then the only costs will be the purchase of the chicks and their feed.



- There is no accumulation of manure and the grass cover is not destroyed.
- There is good protection from flying predators such as hawks and eagles.

Disadvantages

- Dogs, skunks, coyotes, etc., can get into the pen and kill or severely harm many of the birds.

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Disadvantages continued

- A daily move is required and, if the pen is too heavy, it will be difficult to move.
- If there is a long period of wet weather, the birds may be sitting in the mud which can reduce their productivity.

DAY RANGE MODEL

Another method of pastured poultry production is referred to as the day range model. In this situation, a poultry house with a floor on skids or without a floor is constructed. Bird movement is controlled by surrounding the house with netting (sometimes electrified) that is moved regularly to force the birds to utilize fresh ground. If electric fencing is not necessary, the orange plastic mesh used around construction sites makes good temporary confinement. This usually comes in 100ft rolls and can be held up with step-in posts.

Advantages

- It is inexpensive to get started.
- The birds are allowed out during the day and are confined to the house during the night.
- Gives good protection from night time predators.
- If the unit has a floor, it gives the birds a place to get off the wet ground. In the Baton Rouge area with the nearly level land and poorly drained soils, the floor is essential.

MOVING BIRDS TO PASTURE

Chicks are generally moved to the pasture pens at two to three weeks of age. Exactly when the move will occur depends on the weather and how well the bird's feathers have developed.

The move is generally later in the early spring and late fall when the weather is cooler, compared to the summer when it is warm. If the



- It is hard to catch the birds and remove them from the pen at the time of harvest. Generally someone has to crawl into the pen on their hands and knees and pass the birds out to another person who puts them into the carrying crates.

- If it is necessary to move the house, the birds can be shut in and moved at the same time.
- It is easy to catch the birds at the time of harvest.

Disadvantages

- Dogs, skunks, coyotes, etc., can get into the pen and kill or severely harm many of the birds.
- May cause damage to the sod cover, especially if the house has a floor or is not moved frequently enough.
- The birds must be cared for twice daily.
- It is more expensive than the Salatin style pen, especially if an electric fence is needed.

chicks have good feather cover, they can be moved earlier than if their feathers aren't as well developed.

When the birds are moved outside, they should be placed in pens already prepared with food and water. The pens should have an area where the birds can shelter from the sun and wind.

MANAGEMENT ON PASTURE

Once the birds are on pasture they must be managed carefully. They must always have water available. If possible, use two waterers in case one fails. The most common type of waterer for pasture use is the Plasson style waterer. This is an automatic waterer that has a small trough from which the birds can drink. The supply for the waterer in the Salatin style pen is a bucket sitting on top of the cage. For the day range pen, the waterer may be placed inside the house and the supply hung on the outside. In either case, the buckets are emptied daily and refilled with fresh water. Most producers use tube-type feeders that can be moved as the pen is moved. Other growers use 4" PVC pipe that is split lengthwise and hung on the edge of the cage to provide a trough for the feed. The feed should be fresh and replenished daily. Any wet feed or feed that has been fouled by feces or other material should be discarded and new feed added. The lip of the feeder should be placed at the height of smallest bird's back and raised regularly. The pasture for your naturally-grown chickens should be a clean mixture of grasses and clovers to which no insecticides or pesticides have been added for several years. The birds should be forced to move to clean pasture every day. With the Salatin style unit this is accomplished by physically moving the pen



one length forward to ground that has not yet been exposed. In the day range unit, the fence should be moved daily.

Broilers, are big, heavy birds that lack the motivation to get up and walk around. If the feeder is near the house and the water, they will just sit in one area and eat. The birds can be forced to use the entire pasture area if the feeder is placed at the far end away from the house so they have to walk to eat.

Because the birds don't like to be exposed to direct sunlight, the housing should provide shade. The area should also provide protection from predators. This may be through electro-netting or other means to keep dogs, coyotes, skunks, raccoons, etc., from getting to the birds. Protection from flying predators is provided with the Salatin style pen but not with the day range model.

RESOURCES

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