

# Animal Sciences

## Getting Started with the Home Poultry Flock

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**EXPERT  
REVIEWED**

### Introduction

The desire to begin raising poultry must be carefully considered before the first purchase. As the husbandry person, you will need to become acquainted with a variety of potential issues before the first purchase. First you should investigate and determine if there are any zone, community, or local restrictions limiting the size of flock or prohibiting you from having birds. In addition and while you are visiting the building commissioner, ask about restrictions and/or permits to construct a pen for these birds. Once this is done, you will need to decide on what type of birds you really prefer, e.g., birds for meat consumption, layer hens, 4-H showing hens, or a combination. Regardless of choice, the decision should be made up front, because purchasing the wrong type(s) of birds can be costly, and you will be obligated to care for something you didn't really intend to have.

### Housing of Birds

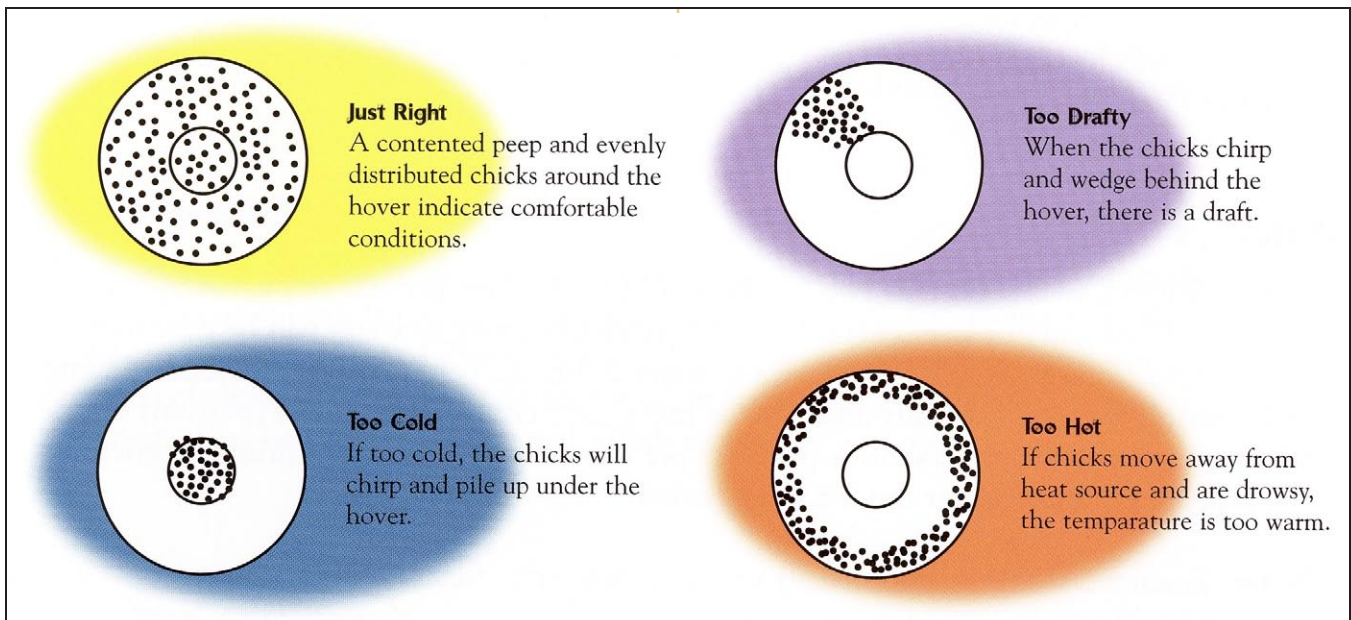
Depending on what type of bird(s) you are interested in purchasing, you will need to prepare a shelter. In preparing a shelter, you should give consideration to the location on your property and potential threat of predators, i.e., raccoons, coyotes, cats, and dogs. It may require, depending on your location, that some of the fencing wire be buried below the surface to prevent any of these aforementioned predators from getting to the birds. Along that line, be sure the fence wire size is small enough to prevent other critters, i.e., minks, weasels, etc., along the outside edge

to access the birds. Lastly, you will want to give some consideration to proximity to the house before construction begins, because you may decide to run electricity and/or water to the facility, which will be nice when you need light, heat, and water. You will want to choose a location which drains well, because birds move a lot during the day following a rain whereupon they will make a tremendous mess.

As for bird space, home flocks are given space at approximately 3' x 3' per bird, so if you want 20 birds, you will need 180 square feet of floor space which is equal to a 10' x 18' pen. In general, flocks experience some level of death loss, and in the example above you might try over stocking by 10 to 15 percent, i.e., two to three more additional birds beyond the 20 because through death loss, you will achieve the desired ratio of birds to floor space.

As mentioned, you will have death losses, so you will need to give consideration on how you want to dispose of the bird(s). For a better understanding of bird disposal within the state of Indiana, visit the Indiana Board of Animal Health, <http://www.state.in.us/boah/>.

As for temperature, birds (four weeks of age or older) are best suited for 70°F, and like humans, they can endure a wide range of temperatures. In Indiana, there are two very important times to really watch birds: extreme winter and extreme summer. During extreme conditions, i.e., below freezing, birds will



**Figure 1.** Brooding area temperature is important.

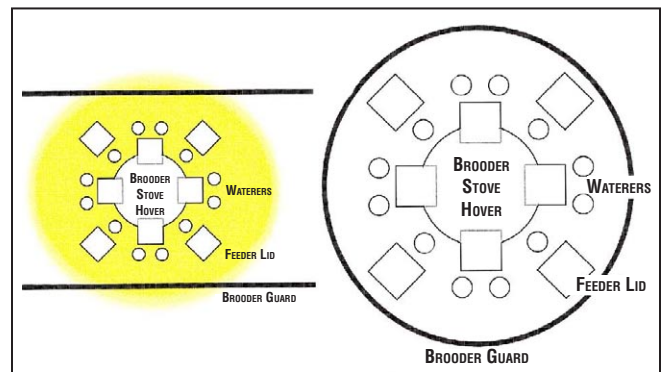
begin to shunt blood away from extremities, especially the comb and toes. If this occurs, you will see those areas become blue/black and eventually fall off do to frost bite. Conversely, during extreme heat, above 90°F it becomes important to monitor available cooling areas (mist or shade). Drinking water should be less than 80°F. When the water temperature rises above 80°F, birds tend to refuse drinking water.

As mentioned above, the location should be well drained. Depending on how you construct the pen, a good absorbent litter may be included. Some of the most common litter choices are pine shavings, rice hulls, or ground corn cobs. Another good choice for bedding materials during the wet season is sand, because it allows for excellent drainage. You should avoid using hardwood shavings, because they potentially provide a good environment for molds.

### Placing the Birds

If you are placing newly hatched chicks, it will be important to have the brooding area ready when they arrive (Figure 1); that is, you will want the room temperature around 70 to 75°F with the temperature at chicks' level to be 95°F during the first week. The area assigned to these chicks should have some flexibility such that they can move through a range of temperatures (95 to 75°F). During this period, it will be important to monitor the birds for signs of stress; for instance, if the chicks are scattered around the area and chirping loudly, chances are they are hot; conversely, if you notice the chicks all huddled

together in one area, they are likely cold (Figure 2). At the end of Week 1, begin dropping the temperature by 5°F per week until you reach 70°F, and then try to maintain that temperature.



**Figure 2.** Monitor brooding area for signs of stress.

### Water and Feed

The most neglected and overlooked nutrient is water. In many cases, humans walk by what appears to be a bowl of “clean water;” but in fact, it may contain millions of bacteria. In turn, the bacteria will stress the digestive system of the bird, such that it will not grow at the rate believed to be their potential. As a good practice, the water bowl or dispenser for birds should be cleaned and monitored on a routine basis. In addition, the actual bowl and other items should be cleaned routinely (weekly or sooner) with a product like chlorine to reduce the incidence of microbial

formation. Fresh water needs to be supplied everyday to insure healthy birds. As mentioned in the Placing Birds Section, there are critical times in which the care provider must monitor water, extreme cold, and extreme heat. Obviously, during the cold periods, the biggest concern will be freezing. Many farm supply stores sell heaters specifically designed to keep water from freezing, so this might be needed during an extremely cold period. Likewise, during the extreme heat, you will want to monitor water temperature and make sure there is an ample supply of “fresh cool” drinking water. As mentioned above, birds may refuse to drink when the water temperature is above 80°F. In addition, during the periods of extreme heat, there is an increased risk of microbial growth.

A more detailed paper will be present on feed related to making a ration. For the average homeowner or individual showing birds or rearing layers for egg production, there is a wide range of high quality feeds available from many different sources. There are some general factors an individual should keep in mind when selecting a feed: A) Make sure it is the correct feed for the application; for instance, don't choose a meat type ration when you are wanting layers to lay eggs. B) Be sure to look over the ingredients, so that it meets your requirements; that is, if you want a ration free of meat and bone meal, then just look at the ingredient list across brands. Perhaps the biggest challenge an individual will face is “deciding on which brand” to purchase.

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