

SADDLE-UP!

Sounds a strange title but using a poultry saddle can protect your hens from potentially serious damage and worse during the breeding season.

Feathers can take a real battering at this time of year, and the ways in which this can happen produce effects that may alarm some keepers; particularly those new to the hobby. So it is very important to be aware of the possibilities, and to know how to recognise and deal correctly with situations when you find them.

The loss of feathers is a common problem which seems to cause poultry keepers a great deal of anxiety. It can occur for a number of reasons but the most usual of them all is the annual moult. This is a natural process that all chickens go through as old feathers are replaced by new ones. It can happen at various times during the year but, typically, takes place towards the end of summer. The effects can be startling, with birds often taking on the look of a recently-rescued battery hen. But be assured that it is a completely natural process that has to run its course. Different birds take different amounts of time to replace their feathers, and the effort of doing so means that egg production stops for the duration.

PECKING TROUBLE

A much more worrying cause of feather loss is an undesirable poultry vice known as feather pecking. This, as the name suggests, is caused by other birds, and so needs to be dealt with quickly and effectively if real problems are to be avoided. One mistake often made is to confuse the cause; I have come across plenty of keepers who, on finding the evidence, put it down to a problem with feather mite. However, while this can cause a bird to peck-out its own feathers, it is actually very rare. The trouble is far more likely to be straightforward feather pecking.

The third common cause of feather loss is the damage done to hens during the breeding season. As the male birds perform their creative duties, they mount the hen and cling on in two ways. Primarily they use their claws to grip the hens back and flanks (known as treading), and also their beak to hold on to the back of the hens head and neck. Its not a gentle process and, unfortunately, considerable damage is often done.



Feathers are broken and pulled out, and the skin is frequently torn. It is a difficult thing to avoid, especially if you want to breed your birds.

The most important thing is to separate the injured hen; this must be done as soon as you are aware of the problem as any delay could prove disastrous. Chickens react very aggressively to the sight of blood, and will quickly turn on a bird with this sort of exposed wound. If left, the rest of the flock can, quite literally, peck the unfortunate hen to death. So it is vital that, for her own safety, the affected hen is given time to recuperate completely in solitary confinement, after which she can be safely re-introduced back into the main flock.

There is also a perception among lots of chicken keepers that this sort of feather damage only occurs with the large breeds, but this simply is not true. Most of the pictures used in this feature are of quite small bantams, so you can see the risk runs across all sizes. Generally, though, it is true to say that it is more of a problem with the larger,

soft-feathered birds, such as Brahmas, Orpingtons and Sussex. In these breeds the cock birds are both heavy and large, therefore inflicting the most damage.

Those who keep turkeys can suffer with this problem a lot too. I have had females seriously damaged in a very short time by over-enthusiastic stags. Everything can be fine one moment and then, when you check the birds again an hour later, the damage has been done. So, in short, you must remain vigilant with all breeds and types of poultry, so you are in a position to nip things in the bud.

SADDLE SAVIOUR

However, help is at hand in the form of an unlikely-sounding object called a poultry saddle. These are made either from leather or canvas, the saddle is secured to the females back using adjustable straps which loop under then wings. They have been used by turkey breeders for years, and are becoming more and more popular among chicken keepers anxious to prevent treading damage. Most

birds don't take long to get used to being saddled, and the movement of their wings is not impeded at all if the straps are fitted and adjusted correctly (not too tight).

Poultry saddles are available in three sizes; making them suitable for use on everything from a True Bantam to a turkey. Personally, I prefer the canvas types, as they tend to be softer and are simpler to fit. Also, not only do they protect the hens back, but they provide plenty of grip for the male bird too. What's more, they are easy to wash, which is another important consideration. However, if you are after a really long-lasting product, then the leather types will go on for ages although, without a bit of TLC, they will become hard and potentially uncomfortable for the bird.

At a practical level, it's vital that fitted saddles are checked regularly. One of the big dangers is that the warm, dark underside provides an ideal environment in which lice and other parasites will flourish. So my advice is that you inspect carefully every week, and use a good louse powder to prevent infestation problems.

