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Inside this issue:

<i>Avoiding Heat Stress in Your Flock</i>	1
<i>Predators and Poultry Flocks</i>	2
<i>Predators and Poultry Flocks</i>	3
<i>Avoiding Heat Stress in Your Flock</i>	4
<i>Contact Information</i>	4



Feathered Facts

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UF/IFAS Extension Baker County

Extension Friends,

Now that we have gotten to the 'hot' part of the year, there are certain things that you, as a poultry owner, need to think about. One of the main issues that we face in Florida is heat stress in our birds. You should also be on the lookout for predators, especially if you have a flock with young chicks. Many predators are opportunistic so care should be taken to protect the flock. As always, if we can help you in any way, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Michael A. Davis, Ph.D.

UF/IFAS Extension Baker County



Avoiding Heat Stress in Your Flock

Chickens, like most other animals, can be prone to heat stress during periods of high temperature and high humidity, both of which are in ample supply during summer in Florida. It is important to be able to recognize the signs of heat stress in your flock and how to avoid placing them in danger from the heat.

The normal body temperature for a chicken is around 105°F. Unlike humans and other animals, chickens do not possess sweat glands and thus cool themselves by panting. This panting will evaporate moisture from the throat allowing the bird to lower its body temperature. It is important to note that older birds are more susceptible than younger birds to heat stress because of their larger body size and the insulation provided by fully formed feathers.

Signs of heat stress in your flock include: gasping, lethargy, pale combs and wattles, increased thirst,



decreased appetite, decrease in body weight, and potential increase in cannibalism. While these signs are not exclusive to heat stress, they can indicate the condition, especially if we have had prolonged hot weather.

As a flock manager, you should keep in mind that heat stress can cause various issues within a flock including: drops in production, increased mortality, decreased egg size, thin egg shells, and poor egg quality and functionality.

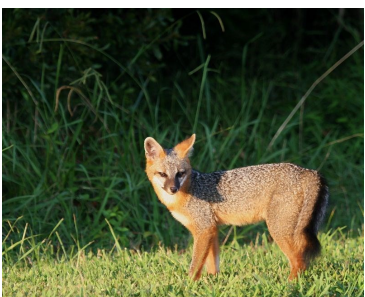
Continued on Page 4



Picture of a bobcat, a common predator of poultry. Photo courtesy of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Original image can be found [here](#).



Picture of a coyote, a common predator of poultry. Photo courtesy of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Original image can be found [here](#).



Picture of a gray fox, a common predator of poultry. Photo courtesy of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Original image can be found [here](#).

Predators and Poultry Flocks

Keeping an eye out for disease in your flock is typically a high priority. Keeping predators out of your flock is just as important to the overall health of your flock. Even though you may never have noticed some of the predatory animals that can affect your flock does not mean that they are not present and it does not mean that they will not seize an opportunity if one is presented.

Small flock owners typically have more difficulty with predators than their larger counterparts because of the differences in the type of housing that is used for the flock. Keep in mind that houses for any size flock should be constructed to keep predators out. The proper use of chicken wire, netting, and proper locking mechanisms for doors and windows is a must for keeping predators out. Also keep in mind that although small rodents, such as rats and mice, do not usually act as predators for a flock, they can chew wood and make burrow holes that can be used by larger predators.

The use of chick wire fencing is also a good idea for the coop and surrounding areas. Chick wire typically has smaller openings (1 inch or less) than chicken wire. Burying a portion of the wire with it turned outward is a good way to keep predators from being able to tunnel under the enclosure.

There are many predators that can attack a flock and the identification of these predators is the best way to develop a plan to keep attacks from happening. Common predators of backyard flocks include: canines (dogs coyotes, foxes), felines (house cats and bobcats), weasels, raccoons, skunks, opossums, snakes, and predatory birds (hawks, owls, eagles).

Canines—Domesticated dogs usually kill chickens for sport. Birds that have been attacked by a dog typically have a great deal of mauling of the carcass. Dogs will tend to attack the birds during daylight hours. Remember that all domesticated dogs will not act as predators to the flock. Some dogs will protect the flock from other predators. Other canines, including foxes and coyotes, will attack in the early morning while it still dark out. These canines rarely leave much evidence as they will carry the carcass away to consume it.

Felines—Domesticated cats will typically attack younger birds within the flock as the older birds may be too big to deal with. Cats tend to be messy when they consume their prey. They will often eat only the meaty parts of the carcass while leaving the skin with feathers attached. Bobcats tend to be about twice the size of a large domesticated cat. Domestic cats and bobcats are able to see in low light and may attack during twilight hours, but can attack at any time of the day. Bobcats will attack both young and full-sized birds.

Raccoons—Raccoons have very dexterous front paws and may be able to enter areas that other predators can't. Raccoons will often chew the head, breast, and crop of a bird. Raccoons will also steal eggs from nest boxes. They tend to eat then within about 30 feet of the nest.

Skunks—Skunks do not usually attack adult birds, but prefer to go after chicks. They will typically eat the abdomen of the chick. Skunks will also steal eggs from nest boxes. The odor left behind is a good indication that a skunk has visited your flock.



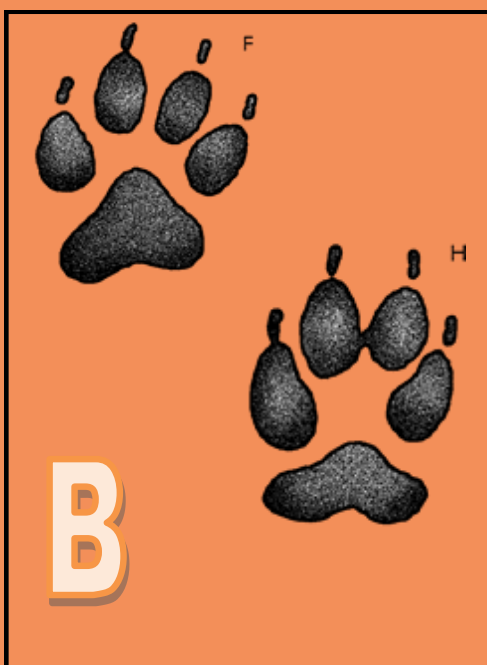
Predators and Poultry Flocks

Weasels—Weasels are very wily animals that are rarely seen. Weasels can be active in daylight or nighttime hours. They are considered to be voracious eaters. Carcasses that might be left behind from a weasel attack often show a killing bite to the base of the head. Because weasels are long and slender, they can squeeze through holes that other predators may not be able to get through.

Opossums—Opossums tend to be nocturnal and they will both attack birds and steal eggs. Most attacks from opossums will show feeding from the cloaca area upward in larger birds. Smaller birds may be totally consumed.

Snakes—Unlike some of the other predators on this list, snakes do not typically leave behind any trace of their attack. This is because snakes consume their prey whole. Snakes will most often go after eggs but have been known to attack birds of various ages. One of the more common snakes in this area is the rat snake. Although snakes do not typically leave behind evidence of their predation, many flock owners have found snakes in their growout or coop area after the snake has consumed a meal and was not able to leave the area because of its increased size.

Predatory Birds—Florida is home to many different types of predatory birds such as hawks, turkey vultures, owls and eagles. These birds of prey may not leave behind much evidence of their attack. Hawks, turkey vultures and eagles are primarily active during the daylight hours, while owls are most active at night. It should be noted that many owls will not bother poultry (screech owls, barn owls). However, the Great Horned Owl is one of the top predators for poultry flocks.



Comparison of dog tracks (A) and coyote tracks (B). Notice that the paw shape is straighter and narrower for the coyote when compared to the dog. Please note that in this case the 'F' denotes the front paw and the 'H' denotes the hind paw. Track photos are from the US Geological Survey Website, located [here](#).



Picture of a raccoon, a common predator of poultry. Photo courtesy of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Original image can be found [here](#).



Picture of an opossum, a common predator of poultry. Photo courtesy of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Original image can be found [here](#).



Picture of a striped skunk, a common predator of poultry. Photo courtesy of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Original image can be found [here](#).

There are many proactive measures that you can take as a flock owner to decrease the chance of heat stress in your birds. Good management of the flock and understanding how the flock is reacting to temperature changes will help to avoid the risk of heat stress in your birds.

WATER

- Always provide plenty of cool, fresh drinking water in many easily accessible locations for your flock during periods of hot weather.
- Add electrolytes to the drinking water:
 - The act of panting will change the electrolyte balance within the bird. Adding electrolytes will help to maintain the needed balance within the bird and will help to increase water intake. However, you must be vigilant in adding electrolytes to the water as adding too much can upset the balance within the bird and cause problems as well.

FEED

- Feed intake will naturally decrease during hot weather. To counteract this, provide feed during the cool parts of the day such as early morning and late evening. The digestive process produces extra heat that can cause stress within the flock during the hottest parts of the day.

ENVIRONMENT & MANAGEMENT

- Make sure to provide adequate ventilation for the flock. Install fans if necessary.
- Consider installing an evaporative cooling system. These system provide a mist or fog that moves water through the air. Water on the bodies of the birds will help to cool them, but make sure not to soak your birds.
- Avoid overcrowding. Overcrowding increases the ambient heat in the area and reduce the effectiveness of ventilation and evaporative cooling.
- Birds may tend to rest during the hottest portion of the day. Don't disturb them.
- Remove accumulated litter from the confinement area. Decomposition of the litter produces heat which can increase the ambient temperature of the area.
- Radiant heat from direct sunlight can also be an issue in the confinement area. Help to reduce radiant heat by installing insulation in the ceiling area.
- If you let your birds out to forage remember that tall grass and weeds in the foraging area will reduce the natural air flow. Bare ground can also cause issues with radiant heat. Keep the grass in the forage area cut to allow air flow, but don't let birds forage on bare ground.

Additional information about heat stress can be found [here](#).

A scientific journal article on electrolytes and heat stress in broilers can be found [here](#).



UF/IFAS Extension Baker County
1025 W. Macclenny Ave.
Macclenny, FL 32063

Phone: (904) 259-3520
Email: baker@ifas.ufl.edu
Website: <http://baker.ifas.ufl.edu>
Hours: M—F 8:30am to 5:00pm
(Closed Noon to 1:00pm for Lunch)