

# Incubating and Brooding

Middlesex County Avicultural Club of Massachusetts

Incubating eggs can be done two ways, with a broody hen and electric incubator. There is no best way, they both have pluses and minuses so we will give you the information and you decide.

Broody hens: All hens do not go broody (want to sit on eggs) but most take a try at it. Usually after laying for a while she may stop laying and begin to fluff up, cluck a lot, stay around one spot or sit in the nest all day. These are the signs she is feeling motherly. If you collect eggs every day and are saving them to hatch, here is your chance. Start by using other eggs you don't care about. Dust her for lice before setting, it will be the last chance you will have and it's important. Set-up a nest in a pen where she can be away from the other birds (large pet carrier works well) set her on the nest with infertile eggs and see how committed she is to sitting. If she sits for two or three days you can take a chance and set the eggs you have saved under her. Standard hens can sit on around 9-10 eggs comfortably. Bantams like Cochins and other feather or large breeds up to 8 eggs. For Modern Game & old English 6 would be better. Standards can sit on bantam eggs visa versa; just adjust the number of eggs. The pen must have food & water for her because about once a day she will come off the eggs eat drink and poop. There is no guarantee she will sit the 21 days it takes, some hens just quit. Check her every day and make sure she eats and drinks. She will loose weight while sitting, this is normal.

If you want to check for fertile eggs after 7 days remove one egg at a time at night and with a flashlight cup the egg with your hand and shine the light through. If you see a black spot with veins coming out of it you have it made. Remember not all eggs will be fertile and all fertile eggs don't always hatch. When you check for hatched chicks it will take 24 to 48 hours for all to hatch. After you are sure all chicks have hatched you can gently get her off the nest with her chicks because the babies need to drink and eat. Remember they can go for several days without food because they are using up the last of the egg yoke on their belly.

Some hens are great at sitting and hatching but don't like taking care of the chicks. Some times they abuse and peck them or leave them out in the cold so watch her. If she isn't a good mother, have your back-up electric brooder ready to go and put the chicks in there. The chicks will be fine if you take care of them. If she is a good mother keep them away from the other chickens and she will do the rest. Give them more room as they grow bigger. If the weather is warm, May or June after 8 weeks they will be fine on their own, even sooner if they are feathered out.

## Incubators

If you have or can borrow an incubator then you can hatch your own chicks. It can be tricky and doesn't always work out but I'm sure you can hatch enough to make you happy. Follow the instructions carefully and check often. Most incubators are kept between 99.5° F and 101 ° F. Humidity should be around 40-50%. Be sure to keep water throughout the 21 days in the water tray. If there is condensation drops on the window, I don't add as much water.

If you have an auto turning machine on the 19<sup>th</sup> day remove the eggs' take out the turner and return the eggs to the incubator. It is fine to have the eggs cool slightly, remember the mother gets off the eggs to eat each day so they're fine. Add water and try not to open the incubator until the chicks are hatched.

If you have to turn your eggs by hand mark an "X" on one side and an "O" on the other side of the egg and turn the eggs three or four times a day. On the 19<sup>th</sup> day stop turning the eggs, add water and try to keep it closed until the chicks hatch. If you do not have an incubator an experienced exhibitor may be willing to incubate your eggs for you.

## Brooding Chicks

Have the brooder set-up and warm for 24 hours before you transfer the **dried** chicks from the incubator to the brooder. Take a temperature reading under the bulb; it should be 95° F as the chicks grow reduce the temperature 5° F each week until it is 70° F.

Get a Quail waterer from the grain store so the chicks won't drown. Also get medicated chick starter. This is to prevent coccidiosis an intestinal parasite that makes chicks very sick. Feed this starter mash for up to 12 weeks. You will then go to game bird crumbles or grower feed for an additional 8-12 weeks. After that you can feed them layer or breeder pellets or any mature chicken feed.

Keep the shavings very clean, changing them often. With the heat and droppings the brooder area can begin to smell really quickly. This can be prevented just by changing all the shavings at least twice a week.

As the chicks grow they need more room so be ready to move them into a space you have already prepared. Clean water, clean air, clean pen, and plenty of food will produce a healthy happy show or production birds. In about 5 or 6 months the pullets will begin to lay eggs. Also at this time you can start to show them. If they are hatched by the end of March they could be in the 4-H show in August. This will get them ready for the many fall shows that will follow.

