

## **“Cull Early, Cull Often”**

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In the spirit of the political season, I have entitled this article with a takeoff on the old political slogan “vote early, vote often”. If you are too young to know what that means, “Google” it!

I was thinking the other day about how expensive it has become to raise birds. Unfortunately, some folks will not go to shows, hatch only a few, or get out of the hobby entirely! I submit to you that there is a better way.

To begin, raising Modern Games is an economical choice in and of itself due to their small size and appetite. Still, they eat too, and my birds’ feed prices have risen by over 40% since this same time last year. With the recent flooding in the Midwest and its subsequent effect on grain futures, they will rise even more. Let’s not even start on gas prices!

So, how do we combat this without raising too few chicks to continue improving our lines, or even worse, not going to shows to exhibit our hard work and enjoy the hobby we love? The answer lies in how we cull our flock.

Culling is an essential part of any breeding program, and if you are too tender-hearted to cull ruthlessly, you will never achieve any kind of long term breeding success. You can usually find someone in your community who has no interest in your birds for show, and will gladly take your culls for any number of reasons. Just be sure that they do not intend to raise or sell birds and put them off on unsuspecting buyers who think they are getting show quality stock.

Now I am ready to get specific about why I wrote this article. I have always culled hard, but I have been guilty of waiting too long to do it. For example, if you raise any laced variety, you will have a certain percentage of plumage color culls no matter how exemplary the phenotype of the parents. Some offspring will have feathering that is too dark, too over laced, or even worse, shafty. The trait you can cull for soonest is the shaftiness. In the past, I would start looking for faults as soon as the birds started “coloring up”, but if the shafting was only minor, I would hold them a while longer, hoping that it would get better when the adult plumage came in. This is where you can save yourself some money. Take my word for it, once shafty, always shafty! If it is there, it is not going away, and it is a heritable trait. **Cull the bird right then.** With experience, you can learn to tell early on which birds will ultimately finish out too dark or over laced for show purposes. I must give a word of caution here. Birds that are a little dark or a little over laced for show may still be valuable as breeders. However, that is an entirely different matter and a possible article for another day.

The sooner a bird is culled the better. You start saving money on your feed bill the moment the bird leaves your place. There are other benefits as well. Many of us crowd our birds resulting in stress on them that is manifested by fighting, feather picking, and poor growth. I know some will say that if you cull too early you may make a mistake. That is true for some characteristics, but with experience you can learn to identify for what and when a bird can be safely culled. Understand that if you are still fairly new to the breed, you will only be able to cull early for color flaws in regards to shaftiness. It will take experience and the time that goes with it to get comfortable culling early for other color problems.

Now, what if you raise a duckwing color pattern such as BB Red, or even a solid color like Black? It will be difficult to cull early here, but the good news is that they will have far fewer plumage color faults. You can cull early for leg color.

So far I have focused on plumage color faults. Let's talk a little about other color problems. Many breeders and judges have a tendency to ignore leg, eye, and face color. These are important points to be considered and are often overlooked.

Generally speaking, in crow wings and solid color varieties, the face, eyes, and legs should be dark. There are variations among varieties, and even some disagreement among standards. Let's talk specifically about Brown Reds and Birchens as they are two of the most widely exhibited varieties. At the time of hatch, you can look at the undeveloped comb and reasonably predict the color of the aforementioned body parts. If the comb is yellow, it will tend to be red faced, gray legged, and light eyed! What you want is the darker comb. A note on BB Red eye color: they will be green for the first 3 months or so, and should change to the appropriate red later.

This article by design has targeted flaws that can be culled for early in order to save money, time, and space. Never forget that culling for type is of utmost importance, and with experience can be done sooner rather than later. Still, some birds will come on later and surprise you. Faults in type that do not improve with age include: roach backs, long backs and underlines, flat shins, crooked toes, coarse heads, and balance problems. I am sure there are others, but those readily come to mind.

That addresses the cull early part, now the cull often. Go through your birds with a critical eye as often as you have time. I can literally find birds with unacceptable faults every week during the summer growing period if I put in the time. I say unacceptable faults because no bird is perfect.

Finally, the merciless culling should apply to your breeders as well. Don't carry over or sell breeding stock that is marginal. You will not only waste feed, you will end up breeding from inferior stock, and for the most part that is all they will produce. Have an eye for improving your lines and saving yourself some money in the process!

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