Big Dutchman
Innovation Breeds Success

8 TIPS FOR OPERATING AN AVIARY



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Key considerations that will have a significant impact

As the layer industry continues to move quickly toward alternative style housing, it's important to understand how it differs from conventional housing, as well as how to handle those differences. It is also crucial to know how alternative systems are managed and how to properly manage your flock within those system environments. In this article, we look at some best practices for aviary systems.

1. START THE CHICKS RIGHT

It's best to raise your chicks in an environment that mirrors the laying system that they will be housed in during the lay period. It is a proven fact that birds have a very difficult time learning new behaviors, such as jumping, moving up into the system to drink, feed, perch and lay their eggs in the nest, to name a few.

The health and performance of your layer flock begins with a good foundation. Starting your birds in a system that enables them to learn the necessary behaviors to thrive as a layer is key to maximizing your flock's performance, all while minimizing management effort. In short, birds that are going into an aviary laying system need to be reared in an aviary rearing system – no exceptions.

2. TRAIN THE BIRDS

Chickens are very trainable. One crucial part of training is during the daily sunset phase. As the lights dim in the house, it's important that you train the young chicks to move back into the system for the evening.

After the lights are completely out, we recommend walking through the barn and moving any chicks that remain on the floor into the system. After a couple times of doing this, your chicks will start moving back into the system on their own as the lights dim.

With the birds in the system at night, the air movement is able to dry the litter thoroughly and the birds will be encouraged to move and jump throughout the system. Well-trained birds lay almost no floor or system eggs and have superior performance in the layer house.

3. WALK THE FLOCK

Flock movement is another important part of maximizing bird health and performance. One way to promote bird movement is by walking your flock. Walking your flock is as simple as slowly walking up and down each litter aisle so your birds move around. You can also take this time to inspect the birds and the system, ensuring they are healthy and the system itself is working properly.

We recommend walking at random times so the birds do not get used to being moved the same way each day. If you start walking

your flock as soon as the lights begin to come on, this gives you the opportunity to see floor and system eggs that you must collect immediately. We suggest that you walk your flock five to six times per day.

In addition to walking the flock, we recommend that you spend time every day sitting among the flock. You would do this to observe the behavior and temperament of the birds and then adjust as needed. For example, change the light intensity to curb aggression.

4. COLLECT MIS-LAID EGGS

Any egg that is laid outside of the nest is considered a mis-laid egg, and collecting these eggs is critical. If a mis-laid egg is left, other birds will be attracted to them, resulting in more mis-laid eggs. This will further increase the amount of management time and effort.

By walking your flock and picking up mis-laid eggs, your hens will develop nest acceptance. It's common to see very high nest acceptance in the range of 98% or higher when the flock is comfortable and when the litter aisles are walked at least three times per day.

5. CONTROL THE LIGHTS

Lighting is one of the best management tools offered in an aviary barn. The way the lights are turned on and off will help train and prompt the birds to begin laying and to rest at night.

Using sunrise lighting in the morning and a sunset in the evening encourages natural behaviors and birds will require less management overall. During the sunset phase, you should begin with dimming the lights under the system first. Next, move to the ceiling lights. Finally, move to the in-system lighting – working from the bottom of the system. The top system lights should be the last to shut off at the end of the sunset. Birds will naturally follow the light and will be encouraged to move off the floor and into the system.

6. CONTROL THE EGG AFTER IT'S LAID

Once the egg is laid, it is important to ensure it remains high quality. If managed correctly, the egg collection systems that exist on the aviaries will help accomplish this. You can program the moving of the belt and the length of the nest box frequently during peak lay periods (depending on the breed and barn conditions, this becomes a matter of experimentation). This will ensure the eggs are evenly spread out on the egg belt and the eggs do not build up and cause damage to each other due to overcrowded areas along the way.

In addition, most aviaries include a programmable egg saver system that stops the egg just before the egg belt, slowing the egg entrance to the belt. This provides a tool to help control the even distribution of the eggs on the egg belt. Again, this will require some experimentation to work in tandem with the moving of the egg belt. Together, when programmed properly, these two devices can increase the salable eggs dramatically.

7. SET IT UP RIGHT

Although not a management practice, it is crucial to the long-term success of the facility that some simple barn layout fundamentals are followed. Make sure the aisles are wide enough so that litter remains dry and loose.

If the aisles are too narrow, the litter will remain wet and will clump and stick to the floor. This will discourage birds from dust bathing and require a great deal of effort to control litter throughout the flock. We recommend at least 50 inches of space between sections.

This also applies when installing "combi" systems (systems that can convert from enriched housing to aviary at a later time). If you plan your system with this in mind, your "combi" system will be a much more effective aviary in the future.

8. FEED THEM RIGHT

Having a planned feeding program helps establish a routine for the birds and encourages nest acceptance. There are many ideas about the "correct" amount of hours you should wait between each feeding.

The most important principles we recommend are to wake the birds up with a feeding and then wait to feed them again until after the peak laying period. We recommend this because birds are attracted to the sound of the feed system. Thus, they are encouraged to go to the trough when they hear it run. This will disturb the use of the nest and cause more mislaid eggs. Once the peak laying period is over, then you can feed your birds at regular intervals throughout the day to best suit your situation.

CONCLUSION

If you adopt these simple ideas, your aviary experience will be successful. There are, of course, many more things that make an effective layer farm, but we believe these 8 areas will have the largest impact on a successful aviary operation.

Also, keep in mind that some equipment manufacturers have bird behavioral specialists on staff to help with the startup and operation of aviary equipment. When you can, utilize these specialists to ease the transition and make the aviary experience a success from your very first flock.