

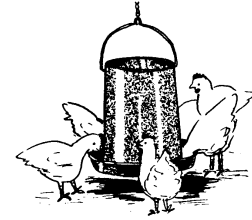


The University of Georgia

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BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .

BEHAVIOR OF BACKYARD FLOCK PART II

Previously we looked at three specific behaviors that you will observe in your backyard flock. In the Backyard tip this month we will continue to look at more behaviors that birds perform in the backyard. Some of these activities will be more obvious if your birds are allowed to roam freely.

Comfort Behaviors

Comfort behaviors include activities that are involved in body maintenance of the chickens. Some of these activities are self-directed and include leg and wing stretching, wing raising, wing flapping, tail wagging, and preening.

Preening

Preening is a self-directed behavior that can be observed in many birds. It involves the manipulation of the feathers by the beak. Oil secreted by the uropygial gland (which is located above the vent) is spread over the feathers during preening to keep the feathers supple and water resistant. It can also indicate irritation of the feather follicles especially during molting. Evidence suggests that this behavior is essential both in response to peripheral stimulation from feather disarray in mild frustrating or conflict situations.

Dust Bathing

Dust bathing involves interaction with environmental resources such as sawdust, sand or any other loose material that is available. Dust bathing functions to maintain feather condition by dispersing oils and also to remove skin parasites. Regular dust bathing removes the excess oils from the feathers. The activity is usually stimulated by the amount and the staleness of the lipids on the feathers. Hens which are reared in free range conditions spend a significant amount of their time dust bathing, usually resulting in the excavation of dust bathing hollows in favored locations. It has been suggested that the lack of an appropriate dust bathing substrate can result in the development of feather pecking and also the performance of sham or vacuum bathing, if possible you should provide a substrate for the birds to dust-bathe in.

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

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Other Maintenance Behavior

You may observe your chickens performing other activities such as head shaking, head scratching, tail wagging, feather ruffling and unilateral wing-leg stretching. These actions will be observed in all husbandry systems. However, if birds are kept in small cages for an extended period of time they will perform these activities more frequently for a time when they are released to larger areas. Wing stretching, raising and flapping are restricted when you keep birds in small cages, but this activity can be observed frequently when birds are in wide open spaces.

General Locomotion and Exploration

If your birds are free range birds you may have observed that they spend a lot of their time exploring, and if allowed some chickens will roam long distances. Birds which are kept in cages also spend a lot of their time walking around the cage. This activity in a cage system is usually associated with foraging. Studies have shown that even when chickens are well fed they still spend a large amount of their time exploring and foraging.



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“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”