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R H. Morris
Department of Agriculture

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TEACHING CHICKENS TO PERCH

By R. H. MORRIS,
B.Sc. (Agric.),
Officer-in-Charge
Poultry Branch.

The teaching of chickens to perch at a relatively early age is one of the most important managerial practices in the successful raising of healthy birds. Each year, many good chickens have their growth seriously retarded and in some cases are even trampled to death, by being permitted to remain on the floor until they are 10 or 12 weeks of age. Through faulty husbandry, some chickens, especially heavy breeds, never learn to perch and, as laying hens, camp on the ground in preference to perching.

Chickens that are allowed to camp on the litter after they are five weeks of age are apt to sweat, and smother one another. On reaching the age of five weeks, the chicks will migrate from the warm brooder, which is usually placed in the centre of the brooder compartment, to one particular wall or more frequently to a corner of the compartment and if left to their own devices will camp and crowd in the same spot night after night. In order to keep warm on a cold night, the biggest chickens being the strongest, are able to fight their way to the centre of the crowd, and it is these first-class specimens that perish. The group as a whole takes on a bedraggled appearance and should coccidiosis come along, as it very often does at this age, these conditions will considerably reduce the efficiency of the sulpha drugs (sulphamezathine or sulphaquinoxaline) which are normally used to cure this disease.

The teaching of chickens to perch, if not properly carried out, can be one of the most exasperating tasks experienced on a poultry farm. On the other hand, if a perching platform is used, the task is made relatively easy. A common but arduous method is to pick up each individual chicken and place it on the perch. The chicken responds by immediately jumping down on to the floor. The duration of the battle depends on the degree of persistency shown but frequently the farmer gives up, in despair, after two or three nights of fruitless endeavour, and yet another year's chickens suffer a severe check in their development.

THE PERCHING PLATFORM

To avoid such unsatisfactory occurrences and to promote even, rapid growth in the chickens, they should be taught to perch with the aid of a perching platform at four to five weeks of age.
Fig. 2.—Batches of six-week-old chickens are snugly bedded down for the night behind the bagging curtain shown in the top picture. The bags, which form a cold brooder, are attached to the permanent perches installed 12in. above the platform. The bags forming the roof extend to within 18in. of the sides of the shed and 9in. of the back wall. The hanging curtain is 2in. to 3in. from the platform.

(Below) By lifting the front bag, one half of the chickens may be seen in position. Note how the chickens occupy the central portion of the platform. By appropriately arranging the bags, the chickens can be effectively discouraged from crowding into the corners of the platform or on to the back protective board.

Note the sloping protective boards at each side of the platform. At seven weeks of age the top bags will be removed, and the front bags will be taken away a week later.

A wooden platform made of 2in. x 1in. battens placed flat, spaced 3in. apart, and raised approximately 6in. from the ground should be placed along the back wall of the shed and the chickens should be driven on to this platform at dusk. The platform overcomes the troubles referred to above by providing a good body of air beneath and around the chickens throughout the night.

After driving the chickens on to the platform for about seven consecutive evenings at dusk, they will find their own way on to the platform and camp on it for two or three weeks until they are eight or nine weeks of age, when they will leave it of their own accord and fly up to the perches that are installed 12in. directly above the platform.

Normally, the brooder is used until the chicks are five weeks of age, and it is a good idea to acquaint the chickens with the platform when they reach the age of four weeks. This can be accomplished by installing a platform under the brooder when the chickens reach this age. Kerosene and electric hover brooders should be placed directly on the platform. Infra-red ray lamps, which are usually suspended in the centre of the brooder compartment can, on or about the 28th day, be swung across to the platform and suspended at a height of approximately 14 inches above it. A week later, that is when the chickens are 35 days old, the lights, and in fact any artificial warmth at all, can be dispensed with. Irrespective of how cold it becomes, the chicks will not come to any harm thereafter through chilling, providing they are bedded down on the platform each evening for the next two or three weeks, that is until such time as they take to the permanent perches.

KEEP CHICKENS AWAY FROM WALLS

Provision must be made to ensure that the chickens cannot get under the
platform and also that they cannot crowd on to the cold walls of the shed. In most rearing sheds, asbestos or iron is nailed to the outside of the studs, and if chickens are allowed to crowd on to such a cold surface as these materials provide during the winter months, heavy mortality can result through chillings.

A sloping 6in. x 1in. board running along the back and each side of the platform will be found effective in keeping the chickens away from the cold shed walls.

The bottom edge of the 6in. x 1in. protective board should rest on the platform at a point 4½in. from the wall of the shed and should be sloped away from the platform towards the side of the shed at an angle of approximately 45 degrees. This means that the top edge of the board rests on the outside wall.

The studs of the rearing shed which usually consist of 3in. x 2in. timber should be let into the board. If the studs are thicker than 3in., a wider board can be used. A 9in. x 1in. board is sometimes used and in this case the bottom edge of the board should be 6in. from the wall of the shed in order to maintain a satisfactory slope.

THE BAGGING CANOPY

Compared with vertical boards, sloping boards have two advantages. Firstly there is no possibility, when sloping boards are used, of the chickens getting down between the protective board and the side of the shed. Where vertical boards are used, special provision should be made to guard against this by fitting extra pieces of wood in the spaces between the studs. Secondly the two corners of the platform where each side protective board meets the rear protective board are not sharp. Consequently if chickens are forced into them they can easily extricate themselves. To encourage the chickens to camp on the platform when they are transferred to the rearing quarters at five weeks of age, wheat bags or similar material can be laid over the permanent perches for five or seven nights so forming a cold brooder, the roof of which is one foot above the platform. If the weather is warm, five nights are sufficient.

To encourage the chicks to camp in the centre of the platform and to provide sufficient ventilation, the bags should not extend over the full length of the platform. For instance, a platform 9ft. long would only require the
centre six feet covered over. Also the bags should only reach to within 9in. of the back wall of the shed.

At the time that the bags are placed across the permanent perches other bags should be hung from a perch which is in line with the front of the platform so that they hang to within 2in. of the platform. These bags will afford the chickens protection from the front of the shed and will encourage them to camp towards the front of the platform.

The bags that are draped along the front of the canopy can remain in that position for a fortnight. The chickens will then be seven weeks old and soon after these bags are removed the chicks should show signs of flying up on to the perches at dusk. Should one or two warm nights come along, this process will be considerably hastened. Prior to this time the chickens will have made use of the perches during the day.

When the chickens are brooded and taught to perch in the one shed, the same procedure as outlined above should be followed immediately the artificial heat is removed.

While on the platform the chickens will not suffer any ill effects through crowding, providing no more than 100 chicks are allowed to congregate together. If, for example, 150 chicks are running as a unit, it is advisable to subdivide the platform into two sections from the rear to the front. A length of 9in. x 1in. board placed on edge is suitable for the purpose. Approximately 75 chickens should be driven into each section at roosting time. A platform 9ft. long and 4ft. wide is sufficient for 150 chicks, and for consistently good rearing results, no more than 150 chickens should be reared as a unit.

The permanent perches should be spaced 18in. apart, and as the chickens grow and require more and more perching room, extra perches can be installed towards the front of the shed.

In addition to allowing enough room for a small dry mash feed trough, a rearing shed 12ft. x 12ft. will provide sufficient space for 150 chickens during the rearing period, that is from the time the chickens are five weeks of age until they are twenty weeks of age, at which time they should be transferred to the laying quarters. Do not be tempted to overcrowd chickens at any stage of their development.

By utilising a perching platform, the task of teaching chickens to perch automatically becomes an easy one. At the present time (1952 season) well-grown six week old pullets sell from 8s. to 8s. 6d. each, and one cannot afford to lose many pullets or retard their development by mismanagement at this important stage of their life. Far too many well-grown chickens are lost annually through being allowed to congregate in large numbers on the floor when they should be perching.

**SUMMARY**

When chickens are—

- 4 weeks old—Introduce them to a perching platform.
- 5 weeks old—Remove warm brooder, install perches and bags to form a cold brooder.
- 6 weeks old—Remove bags from top of cold brooder.
- 7 weeks old—Remove bags from front of cold brooder.
- 8 weeks old—Most of them should be perching.
- 9 weeks old—All should be perching. Remove perching platform. Provide extra perches as chicks develop.

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