

Alberta Poultry Breeders Association

Tips for new Exhibitors

Topic 3: Preparing Birds for a Show

Preparing your birds to look their best for a show doesn't start after sending in your show entries. It's an ongoing process that begins with a balanced diet, good husbandry practices and suitable living conditions to limit stress factors such as over-crowding. Here are a few guidelines to help your birds look their best and perform well in the show room.

1. **Protect your flock.** Always be vigilant and do your best to guard your flock from disease and illness. ILT (Infectious Laryngotracheitis) vaccinations in particular are strongly recommended. Birds will sometime have a mild reaction from the vaccine, so plan to give your birds a couple of weeks to bounce back fully before subjecting them to the extra demands of show prep and travel.
2. **Parasite control** should be done on a regular basis. Signs of worm infestation can include abnormal droppings, weight loss, pale comb and wattles, or seeing worms in the droppings. If you suspect internal parasites, your vet can instruct you on treatment options. Check your birds carefully and often for lice and mites. Part the feathers on the back, under the wings and in the vent area and look carefully for anything that crawls on the bird's skin. Mites will leave a dark, sticky residue at the base of the feathers. If you find any sign of external parasites, you'll need to have the infestation cleared up completely before the show. Use a recommended veterinary product to eliminate them...your birds will thank you, and so will your fellow exhibitors!
3. **10-12 weeks prior** to the show, inspect birds and carefully pull broken feathers. Tail and wing feathers take a long time to grow back, so this needs to be done well ahead of show season. Aggressively pulling tail and wing feathers can cause the bird injury – especially a freshly-broken feather – so don't get in a hurry. Separate hens from roosters to avoid further feather damage. Some exhibitors cage each bird separately at this time to protect them from scuffles or picking and help them reach prime condition.
4. **Bathing:** This can be done a few days ahead of the show, or up to about 1 week. The challenge is keeping them clean after you've gone to the effort of washing them, so have a pen ready with deep, clean shavings. Prepare your bath area with at least 2 tubs of warm water; 3 tubs is even better so you can include a second rinse. Use a temperature you would find comfortable for a bath. You can have shampoo already added to the water of your first tub or apply it directly to the bird's wet feathers. Pet shampoos work well for washing chickens. Some exhibitors favour liquid dish soap or laundry detergent. After you've worked suds through the feathers and removed dirt and stains, it's time to rinse. The first rinse can have some vinegar added to help remove soap residue - add about 1 cup

vinegar to 5 gallons of water. The final rinse tub can be clear water or add a little glycerin – it helps bring shine and condition back to the feathers. Washing each bird thoroughly does take some time.

Support the bird with one hand while working out any visible dirt or manure from the feathers, always being careful not to submerge the head. If bathing is done with a calm, confident approach, the bird won't mind the bath and will probably even enjoy it!

5. **Drying:** Wrap the bird in a towel to soak up excess water. This is a good time to trim their nails or beak if needed. Regular nail clippers will work, but pet nail clippers are better suited to the rounded toenails of chickens. Be very careful to trim only a little at a time so you don't accidentally cut too deep and draw blood.

To finish drying, there are a few options. If it happens to be a warm summer day, you're in luck! Let them spend the rest of their day out on grass in a cage with the warm breeze naturally drying them. Make sure they have food, water and shade. Many shows are held in the fall or winter though. You can create a warm, breezy environment in a heated garage or basement using a space heater to blow warm air through their cage. Alternatively, you can hold the bird on your lap while you use a blow-dryer. This will take some time, so be careful not to overheat the bird.

A word of caution: plan ahead to minimize frequent temperature fluctuations which can cause stress and bring on a molt. If you are bringing a bird indoors to wash and dry, it's probably best not to return it to sub-zero temperatures of a cold coop, and then a couple of days later bring it to a show where it will again spend a day or two indoors at room temperature. In some cases it's in the best interests of the bird to forego a full bath, opting instead to wipe away any visible dirt with a damp cloth and give a thorough cleaning only to the areas that need it most.

On show day, all that's left to do is look them over as you cage them. Smooth and straighten their feathers, which may have become ruffled during the trip. Many exhibitors use a light application of Vet RX, Vaseline or baby oil on combs, earlobes, beaks, wattles, and shanks for some extra shine and to bring out the colour. Wipe away any travel dust or bits of shavings with a clean cloth (silk or satin works best!)

Now that your birds are looking their best, stand back, admire them and take pride in your work!

