

Preparing Poultry for Winter

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Winter is here and bad weather will soon be on the way. That means it's time to start getting small flocks that range outdoors ready for the colder temperatures.

Most types of poultry can easily survive winter conditions in Kansas provided that certain precautions are considered. However, some breeds and ages of birds may have a more difficult time. Obviously, small chicks and young stock cannot survive without supplementary heat. That's why most birds don't nest naturally in the winter, however, if you have breeding pens set up and you are still hatching chicks, you will need to provide supplementary heat.

The most important thing to provide birds during the winter is protection from the wind. Not only does a hard cold wind affect the bird's body temperatures, but it also causes exposed skin like combs and feet to become dehydrated and be more susceptible to cold injury. Be sure the birds have several areas in which to hide from the wind so that they have a place to go no matter what direction the wind is blowing. Put plastic over windows and prevent any other drafts from getting in, but be sure the birds can still get fresh air. Be extra careful to ensure that there are no drafts around the roosting and perching area. Remember that birds held up off the ground will encounter more drafts and colder temperatures.

Birds that have the frizzle gene that is popular in the show arena are less likely to survive low temperatures. Birds use their feathers for insulation. When they are cold, their feathers stand up, reducing airflow across their bodies and retaining more heat. However, the frizzle gene causes the feathers to corkscrew and this prevents the birds from naturally insulating themselves. All frizzle type birds should be given some sort of winter protection. Birds with the naked neck gene will also have less resistance to cold climates. Naked neck birds are not crosses with turkeys, but are chickens that have a gene that gives them fewer feathers. Any birds with fewer feathers will have less natural protection in winter.

Never molt birds during the cold weather. In Kansas, birds that are left to molt naturally usually start molt in September. This allows them to get a fresh set of feathers before the winter comes. If you have your birds on a light program, then decide to molt them during the winter, be careful since temperatures below 45 degrees F can cause death of birds in a forced molt.

Preparing for winter is also a great time to do some other chores with the flock. They should be dusted for mites and other parasites and wormed for internal parasites. Be sure to dust the premises as well. You may also want to clip any toe nails and beaks that have grown too long.

Don't forget to keep drinking water available during a hard freeze. If you've been using a nipple drinker system, it will need to be in a place where it cannot freeze. If you are using open water sources, you can use the heater bases to keep the water pan from freezing.

Be sure that the house has dry, clean bedding. Old bedding should be moved to the compost pile. Keep the bedding loose during the winter so that the birds can bed down for extra warmth.

Be sure that your birds get plenty of feed during the cold days of winter. As the birds digest feed, it causes metabolic heat to increase and this helps keep them warm. Some flock owners will throw out some supplementary cracked corn as a snack, which helps increase intake on especially cold nights. Most birds in Kansas can survive without supplementary heat if they have adequate feed and water, protection from the wind, and are in good physical condition.

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