

OHHH, THE WEATHER OUTSIDE IS FRIGHTFUL...

By K. J. Theodore



***Ohhh, the weather outside is frightful
(I'd insert a musical note here if I had one.)***

I'm going to talk about the joys of POULTRY KEEPING THROUGH THE WINTER. (Those of you in the fare weather States can completely ignore me now.)

Only a dedicated Fancier would chip ice cubes out of drinking cups and handle frigid water with their bare hands when it's below zero outside (and sometimes inside) the coop. I'm one of them. But if you think we've got it bad, just imagine for a moment being the one who actually LIVES in the coop, not just the one visiting it occasionally (armed with so much outerwear you can barely move, let alone open a cage door).

I know there's every situation out there from poultry living outside with very little shelter, to those living in the lap of luxury in heated coops. So I'd like to simply address some basics. You'll have to decide how to apply them to your own operation.

The first thing is to understand how the cold (or any dramatic temperature change up or down), can effect your birds' health. When a bird gets cold, it must do certain things in order to keep itself warm and alive through the night. Most people don't realize that many of the wild birds outside do not make it through the night when there's frigid weather or a severe snowstorm, unless they find food and shelter. The same is true of our chickens and waterfowl.

Nature provides for a natural instinct for all birds to 'feed up' and find shelter just prior to going to roost for the night. If you observe the wild birds in your yard, you will actually learn many common sense things about your own poultry. Have you ever noticed that before a bad storm comes in, the wild birds are in a 'feeding frenzy'? That is because their instincts tell them that bad weather is coming and they need to feed while they can and then go find shelter to 'weather the storm'.

The same principal applies to your birds. No matter how many times you feed and water in a day's time, the most important feeding and watering time of the day is right before night. It is imperative that your birds go into a cold evening with both a full crop and a good drink of water. The feed will generate heat in their system (especially if you provide a little corn on the coldest days), and the water will hydrate them, which in turn also helps them keep warm.

The second thing that seems to come up a lot is those frozen combs – or frostbite. Some people mistakenly think that frostbite can only occur on single comb chickens, and even then, only on the roosters. The truth is that although the single comb breeds are more susceptible, any type of comb (or wattle) can freeze, given the right circumstances. The reason most females don't experience this is because they sleep with their heads buried under their feathers. But a hen that doesn't follow this practice is just as susceptible to frostbite as any rooster, if she has a larger comb.

Primarily two things cause frozen combs – drafts and moisture when below freezing temperature conditions exist.

If you can eliminate the drafts and keep the moisture level down inside of the coop, then you're halfway there. If the temperature gets low enough though, there isn't much you can do. But there is one practice that seems to help reduce the damage. Many people believe that if you massage Vaseline into your birds' combs and wattles, they will not freeze. I ran a study of my own on this last year and found that although Vaseline versus no Vaseline made little difference, what did make a difference was the time I took to massage the Vaseline into the comb. In other words, although I think the Vaseline does work to seal out moisture and drafts – the two main culprits in frostbite – what was actually more important was the activity of massaging the Vaseline in. The longer I massaged it in, the more effective it was. So the conclusion I came to and later confirmed with a Vet was that the most vulnerable combs were those with poor circulation, and by massaging these combs, you can actually increase the blood flow to the area and therefore help keep it warm.

Another way to keep your birds warm is to house them together. For example, I put all of my breeding trios together even before I begin turning the lights on for breeding season. This serves two purposes – it helps keep them warmer at night because they huddle together, and it also helps by allowing the birds to work out their differences before the added stress of laying comes on for the hens. This is the time of year that I don't worry so much about condition because as soon as the weather starts to break and breeding season is over, I still have enough time to put the individual show birds up for conditioning before my first show.

Deep bedding is another way to help your birds keep warm through the night. If you ever felt underneath a bird that has borrowed itself into a nice little nest-like seat on top of deep bedding, you know how warm it can get. I always use deeper bedding in the winter than in other seasons. Soft, white pine shavings or clean straw are the best for this purpose.

For those with waterfowl, remember to provide a bath for your birds, even in the coldest weather, provided it is possible under your own situation. Even if they can just bathe and get out just before the water begins to freeze, it is very beneficial for their feather condition. A duck with good feather condition will be able to keep itself warmer than a bird in bad shape. A healthy duck is so heavily oiled that the water should never reach their skin. And the act of bathing will encourage them to preen which, in turn, helps with oiling and feather condition. (Sounds like the chicken or the egg story.) Even your wild birds will bathe in the winter if given the opportunity.

The last and probably the most important thing I want to mention is the general overall health of your birds going into winter. The healthier the bird, the more likely he is to survive, even in the worst of winters. If you've done everything right during the year – such as providing a quality feed, a good vitamin, mineral, and probiotic supplement in clean drinking water, and worming them in the fall – your chances of losing a bird to bad weather is greatly reduced, especially if your birds go into winter with good feather quality and a solid breast on them.