

Keeping a Small Poultry Flock in the Top End Part 1. Planning and Building

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In the Top End it is unlikely to produce eggs more cheaply from a small flock than the price in supermarkets. Hens do not eat enough in hot weather to produce well and it is also difficult to maintain the necessary feed quality. However, a small poultry flock of five to 20 fowls can be a rewarding hobby and a source of fresh eggs and poultry meat.

This Agnote deals with the first steps in establishing a flock, the legal requirements and the necessary buildings. The second Agnote in the series deals with starting the flock and the third with care and feeding.

PUBLIC HEALTH, BUILDING AND VETERINARY REQUIREMENTS

The *Public Health Act* controls the keeping of poultry in the Northern Territory. The Act is administered by Environmental Health Officers employed by the Department of Health and Families (DHF). These officers will investigate complaints relating to hygiene.

The Act requires that in Darwin and Palmerston, poultry be kept in a securely fenced area of at least 18.6 m². Up to 12 birds may be kept in this area and, for greater numbers, 9.3 m² is needed for every five birds. Such limitation also exists elsewhere in the Territory. There is no limit imposed by law on the number of birds that may be kept but the demands of hygiene will limit the number that can be run in an urban environment.

The keeping of poultry is not allowed in Housing Commission homes. Elsewhere, Building Board permission is needed for any structure with solid walls or roof.

In all parts of the Territory a poultry run must be 15.2 m from any dwelling (your own or your neighbour's) or hospital or school and it must be kept clean.

In urban areas, it is wise to consult neighbours before embarking on the keeping of poultry to avoid later complaints. The crowing of roosters, particularly at night, can be heard over quite a long distance.

Several diseases and infestations of poultry, including ticks and stick fast flea are prescribed diseases under the *Livestock Act* and Regulations and the presence of these diseases must be reported to a Stock Inspector of the Department. It is as well to report any new disease.

Any person selling eggs needs to be registered as a food business with DHF. There is no restriction on the sale of eggs or poultry in the Northern Territory. However, if eggs or poultry are being sold or given away the person doing so should be sure that they are in good condition. DHF can move, under the *Food Act*, to prevent the distribution of eggs and poultry that carry disease or are contaminated by pesticides or other poisons. Detection of such diseases or residues must also be reported to a Stock Inspector under the *Livestock Act*. If poultry are being sold for human consumption, they must be killed and dressed in a licensed abattoir if one is available within 60 kilometres.

HOUSING

In rural areas poultry do not have to be enclosed but if birds run free they are in constant danger from native cats, foxes, dogs, snakes, blue tongue lizards and other predators. They may also damage gardens and will lay their eggs in hidden places where they may not be found. For these reasons it is better to confine them. Birds that range widely use energy that might otherwise be put into egg production.

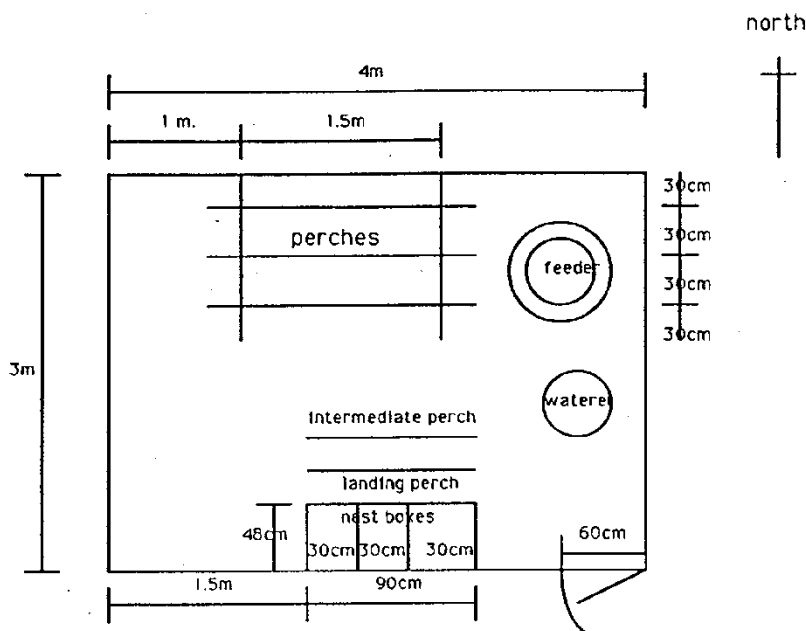


Figure 1. Poultry housing for 12-15 hens

Poultry may be run entirely indoors on deep litter. This system is used in the Top End for rearing meat birds and requires a high standard of building to overcome humidity and make the birds comfortable. More commonly, birds are run in an open shed without litter or in an enclosed yard, with a shed for protection from the weather during the Wet, for roosting at night and for the nest boxes.

A typical shed has an open bird-meshed east, north and south side and a solid wall on the west side. The solid wall may be of galvanised iron but is better made from material such as Hardi-Flex II which is easily cleaned and is cooler than iron.

The shed should have a door so that birds can be shut in at night or when they need to be caught. A separate drop door (25 x 30 cm) may be a convenient way of giving hens access to the poultry run.

Poultry do not do well at temperatures above 27°C and it is most important to ensure adequate protection from the sun year round. The roof and the wall may be painted, preferably matt white, to reflect heat from the sun. Shade from trees, creepers, shade cloth or cooling by sprinklers may be needed (but remember that heavy creepers over a shed may give cover to snakes).

The roof should slope down to the rear (north) with an overhang at the front and back of 600 mm. (Figure 1).

The shed floor should be raised so that it stays dry in wet weather. It may be made from compacted earth, ash, a sand and shell grit mixture or concrete with a rat wall beneath. If the birds are to be kept constantly in the shed they will need 0.75 m² to 1 m² per bird (but remember the area requirement for poultry in Darwin city).

Roosts are not essential but birds prefer to perch up off the ground and may remain in trees outside at night if no roosts are provided. Hens should have 18 cm roost space per bird. Roosts are made of 75 mm x 50 mm timber. Narrow roosts lead to foot problems and malformed breast bones which spoil the appearance of meat birds.

When birds have access to an outside run the area of the shed is reduced to 0.5 m² per bird. The run must be large; otherwise the birds will soon kill the plants and turn the run into a bare area which will become muddy and smelly in the monsoon. It is a good idea to divide the run, if possible, so that half can be spelled for cleaning and regeneration. It may be necessary to shut hens out of the run altogether during prolonged wet weather. It may also be necessary to rake the yard and remove the manure if it builds up and becomes offensive.

Enclose the run with wire netting to a height of 3 m. If birds are not shut in the shed each night, the run should be fully enclosed over the top with bird netting. The netting should be buried to a depth of 45 cm to keep out predators and small gauge bird netting is required in many areas for native cats and snakes.

The run must have a shaded area, either trees or bushes or a shade cloth because ground temperatures in exposed areas may reach 50°C. However, heavy shade over the whole run may cause it to remain wet and smelly during the monsoon.

The shed site needs to be sloping and well drained but should not drain towards a house or garden or into a creek.

FEEDING EQUIPMENT

A 20 kg tube feeder can be used or, if using a trough feeder, allow 8 cm feeder space per bird. To avoid feed wastage, adjust the height of the feeder trough so that hens can eat comfortably (level with the bird's back) but do not fill troughs more than half full. Troughs must be protected from rain during the Wet.

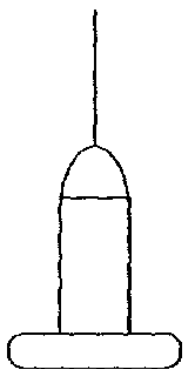


Figure 2. Tube feeder

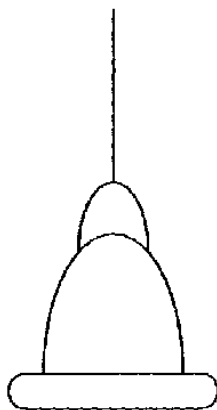


Figure 3. Waterer

WATERING EQUIPMENT

Cool, clean water should be readily available at all times. Water supplied to troughs by exposed piping, on the surface of the ground, along fences or under the roofs of sheds may become too hot to drink and birds will die. A water trough in the yard must be in the shade.

Allow 900 mL/bird storage capacity in an open container or 2.5 cm per bird drinking space if using a self filling trough. A simple trough can be made by cutting open a length of polypipe of 20 cm x 1 m and fastening ends to it.

If using a water fountain inside the shed, place it on a raised platform to avoid wetting the litter.

Take care that chickens cannot drown in their drinking vessel.

Troughs must be cleaned regularly, particularly if they develop a growth of algae.

NESTING BOXES

The nest boxes should be located so that the birds are disturbed as little as possible when the eggs are collected. In a yard system the boxes are placed in the shed. In both systems the eggs are collected from outside the shed via a small door behind the nest boxes. The following points should be noted:

- Nesting boxes should be in the coolest part of the shed.
- They should be approximately 48 cm off the ground and should have a landing perch in front to facilitate access. If the nests are higher than 40 cm, provide an intermediate perch.
- Boxes must have a lip to prevent the eggs rolling out or being kicked out.
- Boxes should be as dark as possible inside.
- One box per five hens is adequate.
- Boxes should be 30 cm wide, 48 cm deep and 38 cm high.
- Put chaff or dry grass clippings or shell grit in the nesting box. Do not use pine shavings or sawdust as the timber may have been treated with pesticide for termite control.

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