

Dubbo Poultry Club

Newsletter

February 2006

I hope 2006 finds you well and with a yard of healthy, growing chickens. This time of year is fraught with all manner of hazards. Foxes have young at the moment and are particularly active. I've also heard reports of people losing birds to snake bite. It pays to be vigilant and inspect pens regularly. The summer heat is always stressful. I hope the article on managing heat provides some ideas for helping you, and your fowls, cope.

Attached to this newsletter is a very interesting piece written by George Arzey, the Senior Veterinary Officer (Poultry) with the Dept of Primary Industries, on Avian Influenza. George is very concerned about the paranoia of the wider public concerning Bird Flu, largely through ignorance of the small chance of this disease getting into Australia.

Please note that the first meeting of DPC for 2006 will be at 7.30PM on Friday 3rd February. At the close of this meeting we will be having our first bench night featuring Silkies. Love them or hate them, this is an opportunity to learn more about this breed. This will become a regular feature with a breed being profiled in each bi-monthly newsletter and a bench night coinciding with the newsletter every second month.

Planning for the 2006 club show has commenced and there are a number of matters to be discussed at the February meeting. If you sponsored a trophy or sash at the 2005 show, or even if you didn't, please consider whether you want to do this in 2006. Early finalisation of such details will ensure that the schedule can be printed well in advance of the show.

Coping with the summer heat

Think summer in Dubbo and you automatically think heat! Dubbo averages 23 days of 35°C heat each year. During the period 10-16 February 2004 Dubbo experienced 7 consecutive days of temperatures over 40°C. Poultry can tolerate temperatures up to 30°C. Above that they eat less, drink more and egg production usually drops. Over 38°C degrees and birds become really stressed. Panting and wing spreading are signs that birds are above their tolerance levels.

There are a number of things that can be done to minimise heat stress. Good shed design should ensure that birds

are not in direct sunlight and that there is good ventilation. Any breeze through the pen will assist. Nest boxes should be located in the coolest part of the shed to ensure that hens aren't overcome by heat stress while laying.

Water is essential! However, birds won't drink warm water so a supply of cool, clean water is essential. Blocks of ice (I keep 1 ½ litre containers in the freeze) placed in water dishes in the afternoon are a huge help in this regard.

If you have the water, hosing pens down will lower their temperature. Misting birds (not thoroughly wetting

them) will assist in keeping them cool. If possible, letting fowls free-range, and wetting the ground beneath trees, will allow them to seek out the cooler spots as well as dig into the damp, cool, soil.

Coping with heat waves is always stressful. Keep an eye on the weather forecast and plan ahead and rather than stay indoors in air-conditioned comfort go out and regularly check birds. Actually going into the pens will give you a better appreciation of what the birds have to cope with. Nobody likes losing birds so vigilance and planning is well worth the effort.

Poultry books

In the October 2005 edition of Australian Poultry was a review of a new book on the market: *Exhibition Poultry Keeping* by David Scrivener. I was pleasantly surprised to find this book in the Macquarie Regional Library in Dubbo. This is a very nice book that I'm sure will be of interest to all club members.

Chapters cover The History of Poultry Shows, Choosing a Breed, The Organisation of Poultry Showing,

Housing and Equipment, Incubation, Chick Rearing, Show Bird Training and Preparation, Judging Systems, General Defects, Poultry Genetics, Double Mating, Selection and Breeding Systems, and Health and Disease. The book is well illustrated with some interesting comparisons between British and American birds. The difference between Leghorns and Partridge Wyandottes (which are not double mated in the US) are particularly striking.

The Macquarie Regional Library should be congratulated on this latest addition to their somewhat limited number of poultry books. Other titles held include Rick Kemp's *Exhibition Poultry Breeders Handbook* (another book well worth looking at) and Bruce Pattinson's three books: *Managing Poultry for Home and Hobby*, *Poultry: the Major Breeds* and *Poultry: the Rare Breeds*. All of these books can be in the library with the call number 636.5082.

The Silkie

The Silkie seen in the show pen today has changed markedly from that of 30 or 40 years ago. Their crests are larger and feathering down the legs is also more abundant than seen previously. The quality of the silk has also improved over time.

Nothing looks so well in a show pen as a well presented white, with brilliant turquoise earlobes and a good shape. Because whites were the original Silkie, it is much less common to find hard feather in their tails than in coloured birds.

A white Silkie should always be used as the basis on which to build a good flock, including colours. The addition of a good white to every fourth or fifth generation of a colour will improve the silk and the overall type of the bird. Coloured Silkies have a tendency over time to show signs of the crosses which produced them, particularly hard feather in their tails and a lack of silk. A white outcross should correct this.

Faults which should also be avoided include a green beak or tip to the beak, horns protruding from the comb in both males and females, ruddy comb, wattles or face, split wings, split crests or Polish crests. It is possible, if the bird has a couple of particularly good points which you wish to introduce into your flock, such as bright turquoise earlobes or excellent silk, to use a bird with one of these faults and trust that a percentage of the resulting chickens will not have the fault. However, you should remember that this is a risky option, as your line will then carry the faults and they could re-appear at any generation. Faults that automatically mean culling from a flock are a single comb, four or

six toes, green legs or feet, featherless legs or feet and vulture hocks.

A breeding bird should be a good representative of its breed, and in a Silkie that means type and silk. A good knowledge of the breed standard is essential to success in the show pen. An important point to remember when breeding Silkies, especially the colours, is that 10% of the points relate to colour, 10% to the legs and feet, and a massive 80% to type, plumage and head. The message here is TYPE before colour.

Look for good head points in the male, as dark faced as possible with a small comb carrying a lot of crest behind it. This will produce good crests in his female offspring. The Silkie's comb is an almost circular cushion of flesh, with a number of small prominences covering it and a slight transverse furrow across the middle. If a male has a very large comb, with little or no crest behind, and long and exaggerated wattles, the young are all masculine in type.

The male must be of good type, and like the female, carry plenty of silk. In the females, go for type, silk, crest and as low to the ground as possible, not showing too much leg. Faults that are strongly



A good Silkie head. Note that the crest is not obscuring the bird's vision.

hereditary are things like missing toenails and weak eye colour. Silkies should have black eyes, and if this is lost in breeding, it is most difficult to bring back.