

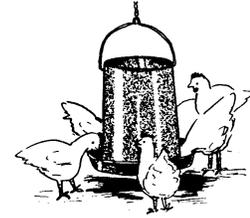


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BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .

BEHAVIOR OF BACKYARD FLOCKS

So now that you have established your backyard flock, you will observe that they will perform different activities during the day. The activities that the hens perform under natural conditions are done with a purpose. In this issue of “Backyard Poultry Tip” we will give an insight of some of these behaviors and their importance to the hen’s welfare. Natural behavior can be defined as any behavior that is exhibited under natural conditions. These activities may be done purely for pleasure or it might be necessary for biological functions. Some of these activities include; foraging, pre-laying and nesting behavior, perching, and comfort behavior.

Foraging

Foraging involves activities such as ground pecking, scratching and locomotor activities that might result in the acquisition of food or water. This behavior is also done to sample new food sources. It has been observed that the jungle fowl spends at least 61% of it’s time in foraging behavior. Foraging behavior in chickens also accompanies feeding behavior, but evidence shows that hens are motivated to forage even when they are provided with adequate food. If hens are prevented from expressing foraging behavior increased feather pecking among hens might result.

Pre-laying behavior and Nesting

Hens will leave the social group and move away from the home range in search of a nest site before laying. Changes in the levels of the reproductive hormones during ovulation triggers pre-laying behavior in hens. This usually involves an increase in locomotor and investigatory behavior in the hours before laying. Hens value suitable nesting sites and spend increasing amounts of time searching for sites. Hens also spend time constructing a nest prior to oviposition. Even if an adequate nest is provided, or the hen is using a nest that it previously constructed and layed in, nest construction activities are still performed. In natural conditions in which hens are allowed to hatch chicks, nest construction would be suppressed by the accumulation of eggs in the clutch. Laying hens also display brooding and incubation behavior. Hens lay one egg on an average every 25-27 hours. If your backyard flock is raised to produce chicks instead of eggs for consumption, you will

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observe that she will not begin to incubate the eggs until a clutch is laid. This will ensure that all the chicks will hatch at the same time. Hens will incubate the eggs by sitting on them with her wings slightly spread to help keep them warm. She sits on the eggs for 21 days, which is the time it takes for them to hatch. If you want the eggs for consumption, you will need to pick them up daily and prevent the hens from setting them.

Roosting

Under natural conditions roosting is important to protect chickens from ground predators. It has been suggested that the feet of chickens and other birds are adapted to close around a perch when they sit, thereby making the behavior an acceptable natural behavior of hens. Perches provide for use of vertical space and encourage additional exercise which can increase bone strength and also allow the hens to roost at night. It also helps to relieve social tensions in confinement by allowing subordinate birds to avoid more dominant ones. Birds that are kept in confinement and not provided with areas to roost will show signs of agitation and increased locomotor behavior, especially around dusk.

Summary

Comfort behavior displayed by chickens will be discussed in a subsequent tip. Recognizing the behavioral needs of your backyard flock and making adjustments to provide a suitable environment could be of significant benefit to the flock.



Claudia Dunkley
Extension Poultry Scientist

Extension County Coordinator/Agent

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”