

Ross Mosteller  
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

## Cold Weather Chicken Care

Small flock, backyard poultry keeping has gained in popularity in my time in Extension. Those who know me well, know that I'm a closet chicken guy and enjoy my mixed flock. Recent confirmation of a resurgence of Avian Influenza across the state has me thinking about poultry. We've avoided an extremely cold winter thus far, but old man winter will eventually arrive, so today I'd like to review chicken care in winter. The University of Minnesota Extension has an excellent publication on this topic.

Low environmental temperatures can lead to cold stress in poultry. A chicken's body temperature lowers when it loses more heat than it can produce. Huddling together, holding a foot up to their breast, or puffing their feathers are all signs that chickens may be cold. Prolonged cold stress can reduce performance and lead to death. Smaller, lightly feathered breeds OR those with large combs and wattles will likely need extra care to stay warm and keep healthy in cold weather.

A coop is essential to protect your chickens from precipitation, wind, and predators year-round, but becomes especially critical in freezing temperatures. There are several steps you can take to make your coop ready for winter. Provide roosts off the ground, made of material that doesn't promote frostbite, such as wood. Mangle drafts and insulate the coop to help retain heat; safely provide supplemental heat when temperatures fall below freezing. Keep coops ventilated as air exchange within a coop is key to preventing moisture build-up and poor air quality due to ammonia. Manage manure and bedding, cleaning frequently or keeping a deep bedding of four to six inches. "Tight", excessively warm coops can actually cause more issues than well-ventilated, cooler coops.

The importance of quality feed cannot be ignored! Chickens should have access to a balanced diet year-round. A balanced diet plays a key role in feather and egg production. Keep in mind that your flock's feed intake may increase up to twenty five percent during cold weather. Be sure to have extra feed on hand and top off feeders routinely. Grit needs to be provided in winter as limited access to this material outside can cause digestion issues. Limit treats and use high starch scratch grains in moderation as they should never replace a balanced ration.

Water is always a key part of the flock's diet and is necessary for digestion. Without water, chickens will stop eating. Chickens should always have free access to fresh, clean water. During cold weather, you will need to keep the water from freezing. There are several commercially available products that work well. Use caution with electricity and flammable materials, follow instructions! Roasted chicken can be a great dish, but not in a coop fire!

Continue to keep your nest boxes clean throughout the winter. Replace nesting materials as they become soiled, broken down, kicked out or thin. Collect eggs as soon as you can daily. Most chickens finish laying eggs before noon. Eggs are largely made of water and are prone to freezing. Always inspect your eggs when you collect them and discard any with cracked shells to prevent foodborne illness.

Frostbite most often affects a chicken's comb, wattles, and feet. These areas may become black or gray in color and feel brittle. The main causes of frostbite are high moisture and cold temperatures. Controlling moisture through airflow and manure management during the winter is critical. Petroleum jelly can be applied to chicken combs and wattles to help insulate them and prevent frostbite damage. If left untreated, severe frostbite can lead to loss of the comb, wattle, or foot.

Quick review:

- Provide supplemental heat when coop temperatures fall below 35 degrees F.
- Collect eggs as soon as you can and throw away any with cracked shells.
- Make sure your chickens have free access to fresh, clean water.
- Manage manure and provide ventilation to control moisture in your coop.
- Heavier standard and dual-purpose breeds can handle the cold better.