VME-20-04

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Extension FactSheet

Veterinary Preventive Medicine, 1900 Coffey Rd., Columbus, OH 43210

Performing a Physical Exam on a Chicken

Sara J. Spiegle B.S.
Avian Disease Investigation Laboratory
Aaron J. Ison B.S.
Avian Disease Investigation Laboratory
Dr. Teresa Y. Morishita DVM, Ph.D., Dipl. ACVP
OSU Extension-Veterinary Medicine & Avian Disease Investigation Laboratory

Disease spreads quickly through flocks, therefore, it is important to be able to tell when an animal is abnormal, physically or behaviorally, possibly indicative of an illness. By observing the bird's behavior in the flock, as well as performing a physical exam, one can potentially prevent the spread of disease to other birds.

Restraining the bird is important when performing a physical exam. It is important to keep the bird calm so that it does not hurt itself or the handler. If the bird appears stressed, place light linen over the head until the bird calms. To hold the bird for examination, reach over the back and hold the wings down to restrain it. Then, pick the bird up and insert your fingers between the legs. Restraining the bird up-side-down is not ideal as it may increase the stress level of the bird and also cause regurgitation and possibly subsequent aspiration pneumonia. After the bird is restrained, the exam can begin. If the physical exam is performed in the field, it is best to do it in the early morning (especially in the summertime) to reduce the stress on the bird.

General Appearance

When investigating a bird's health, one should first observe the bird's appearance and behavior from a distance. In general, a healthy bird is bright, alert, responsive to the environment and interacting with the flock. They will have a healthy appetite and egg production will be uninterrupted. A chicken with abnormal behavior would include a bird that is outcast from the others, reluctant to move, or has decreased water or food intake. If any of these signs are observed, a physical examination may be warranted.

Head and Neck

When examining this region of the bird, one should observe a red, non-flaccid comb, free of scabs. The bird should hold the head high, indicative of good muscle tone, and be free from swelling.

Eyes

The eyes of a healthy bird should be clear; bright and round; and opened wide. The pupil margin should be round with well-defined margins. The eyes should not be cloudy and should be free of any discharge.

Nostrils and Beak

The external nares (nostrils) should be clear and free of any discharge, crust, and scratches. The beak should be smooth, free of cracks, and the tips should come to a point. Suspicion should be raised if there are any scratches in the beak, cracks, or the tips do not meet.

Feathers and Vent

Evaluation of the feathers is important, as it may reveal parasitic infection or evidence of foul play in the flock. On examination, the feathers should lay flat against the body and be well preen. Lift up the feathers and check the base of the feather shaft. This area should be clear and free from parasites. Part the feathers to check for lice and mites. Lice may lay their eggs at the base of the feather shaft, appearing as white clumps. The feathers in the tail and vent region should also be clean and free from any fecal material as white build-up or pasty vents may be indicative of an intestinal disease.

Breast Muscle

The muscles should be full and firm. By gently pressing fingers between the breast muscles, one can get an idea of the muscle tone. If the breastbone is easily palpated, it may be indicative of chronic weight loss and disease. Blisters appearing on the breast may indicate the bird has been down for a period of time.

Wings

The wings can be extended and examined for swelling or lacerations and palpated for broken bones and other possible injuries. The bird should not exhibit pain during wing extension.

Legs and Feet

The scales on the feet should be smooth and closely adhered to each other and straight. Upturned scales may be the result of a scaly leg mite infestation. The bottoms of the feet should also be free from scratches, swelling, scabs or ulcerations. The right picture demonstrates the beginning stages of bumblefoot as evidence by the scabbing.

Visit Ohio State University Extension's WWW site "Ohioline" at:
http://ohioline.osu.edu

Keith L. Smith, Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, OSU Extension TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868 8/2004-des