



Predators of Poultry

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Predation is not common in commercial poultry production. However, predation is a big concern for backyard flocks and organic poultry producers. The reason for this difference is in the way flocks are housed and managed. Commercial poultry producers maintain flocks within buildings for their entire production cycle. These buildings are usually constructed with concrete foundations and a complete roof and open areas, if present, are enclosed by fine net-meshing (i.e., broilers and turkeys) or enclosed entirely by metal siding (i.e., layers). Commercial flocks are at risk from small predators when the building structures are not maintained. Backyard flocks, maintained by small farmers, hobbyists, and youth, are usually housed in existing barns that may not be adequate to keep predators out. In addition, they may not be housed at all, allowing the birds to roam free-range and take cover under existing structures and vegetation (i.e. trees and shrubs). Organic operations are also prone to predation if birds are raised free-range, where they are allowed to graze. Flocks are at the highest risk, especially

during the night, if they are not provided with any enclosed structure for protection.

Predators

A number of different predator species can wreak havoc and economic losses on poultry flocks. Chicken flocks are often more prone than turkey flocks due to the size of birds.

Moreover, younger, smaller birds are more prone to predation. Predators include coyotes, raccoons, foxes, weasels and their relatives, birds of prey, opossums, skunks, rodents, and snakes. Domestic animals, such as dogs and cats, can also be predators of poultry.

Patterns of Predation

Missing birds – coyotes, dogs, birds of prey, and foxes
 For birds of prey, hawks will take birds during the day; whereas, owls will take birds during the night. Often, domestic dogs will not eat the birds, and the carcass may be found in close proximity to the site of the attack. Scattered feathers may also be a sign of panic-stricken birds. Piling or smothering can also indicate potential predation. For example, frightened birds can pile in a corner and smother (suffocate) each other.





Missing heads – birds of prey and raccoons

This occurs when birds are kept in a pen enclosed by loose meshing. Birds of prey can scare birds and cause them to jump or fly up, allowing their heads to protrude through the meshing and grabbed by the predator. Raccoons will reach through the openings, grabbing and ripping off the bird's head through the meshing and wire caging.

Missing limbs – raccoons

Raccoons are notorious for their hand skills and intelligence. If birds are kept in a mesh-style pen, raccoons are able to reach nearby, unsuspecting birds and pull their legs off.

Missing eggs or chicks – opossums, skunks, rats, cats, snakes, and birds of prey

Opossums and skunks will prey at night. Unprotected nests are easy targets for predators. Rats can carry away day-old chicks and can also bite older birds in the hock joint, which can cause a swelling and infection.

Birds with lacerations near the cloaca – weasels and their relatives

Weasels and their relatives tend to bite at the vent region, pulling out the intestines. Some birds can be found walking around, dragging their intestines. Weasels and their relatives also kill for fun, which can leave scattered feathers with bloody or torn carcasses.

Other Signs of Predation

Birds, usually turkeys, found dead in enclosed corners

Turkeys are known to huddle in an area away from open sides to avoid predators that may be stalking around the perimeter. The weight of the huddled birds is enough to suffocate and/or

crush the birds below.

Caged birds found with missing feathers and abrasions

Cats, if brave enough, may unsuccessfully prey upon large birds.

Caged birds, usually layers, with wounds found around the vent region

Although this can be caused by predation, this may also be the result of cannibalism if a bird has a prolapse after passing an egg. Chickens will be attracted to the bright red tissue and will peck at it, causing wounds in their cage mates.

Prevention of Predation

The easiest way to prevent predation is to keep flocks within buildings. However, for the majority of backyard flocks and organic flocks, this is unfeasible or is not a desired alternative. The next best prevention strategy is to lock birds up during the night and maintain a vigilant eye. Open poultry houses should be enclosed by fine meshing to prevent entry by wild birds. Killing predators, both domestic and wild, is not recommended. Non-lethal methods are available and include:

- Motion sensor lights and sound equipment
- Objects with motion, i.e., flags and pinwheels
- Scarecrows and dummy predator birds
- Chemical/pheromone repellents
- Diversion feeding

NOTE: Use of dogs and especially cats to scare off predators can create more problems, because they can interact with wildlife and transmit potential disease-causing agents in poultry species.

Revised in 2019 from Original Source: Ison, A.J., S.J. Spiegle, and T.Y. Morishita. Predators of Poultry. Extension Factsheet, Veterinary Preventive Medicine. The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, #VME-22-05, 2005. Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Dr. Donald Burton of the Ohio Wildlife Center and Mr. Michael Pogany of the Columbus Zoo for the use of their photos.