

Winter Weather and Small Flocks: What You Need to Know

As winter approaches, it is important to make sure that equipment and housing are ready well in advance. By starting winter preparations early, there will be plenty of time to fix any problems before the cold sets in. In order to help the birds continue to be productive during the winter months, we suggest the following:

Protect your flock from the weather

- *Check poultry housing before winter sets in* and fix any leaking roofs that will allow moisture into the coop (Photo 1). Moisture can lead to increased levels of ammonia, as well as make it more difficult for the birds to stay warm. Damp air feels much colder than dry air so it's important to get the barn dry. Look for and fix any cracks or holes that will allow wind to blow into the building. Holes that allow fresh air to blow directly on the birds can chill them and lead to problems. Holes can be filled with spray foam insulation, or by hanging a thick plastic sheet or tarp over problem areas.

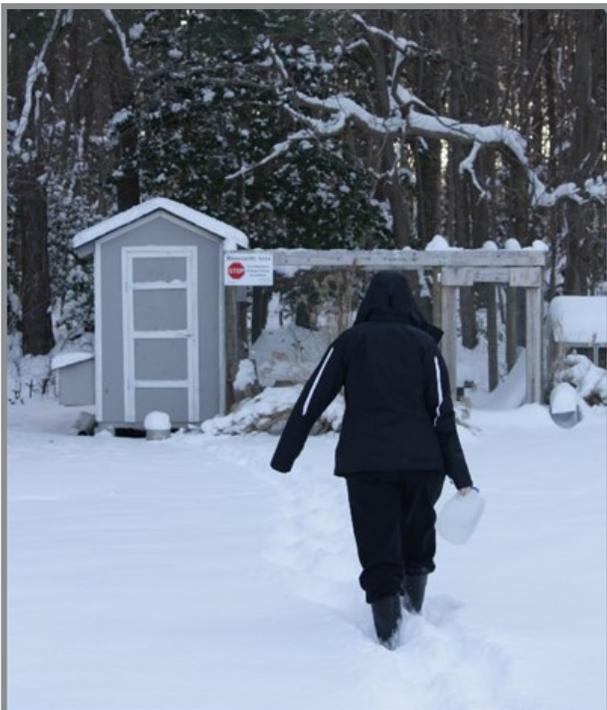


Photo 1. Fix cracks and holes in the coop to keep your flock warm and dry.

- *Situate the housing so that sunlight can enter* during the day and heat the house during the winter. Trees that lose their leaves can help protect the birds from heat in the summer but allow the sun to shine in during the winter.
- *Perches* – Avoid materials like metal and plastic pipes when constructing perches as they will conduct the cold to the feet of the birds and can result in frost bite. Instead, use wood because it will not conduct cold. Preferably, perches should have a flat surface (like a 2x4) that will allow the birds to cover their feet with their feathers when on the perch to keep them warm (Photo 2). It is also important to avoid placing perches above food and water to prevent fecal contamination.



Photo 2. Birds can keep their feet warm with their feathers while sitting on a perch with a flat surface.

- *Insulation* – While insulation is not necessary, it will help keep the heat generated by the birds in the coop and keep the coldest weather from entering the coop. If you are adding heat to a house, then insulation is a cheap way to get the most heating for your money. Insulation is also beneficial during the summer to keep heat out if the coop.
- *Heat* – Young birds will need a source of heat to survive and grow. As long as adult birds are protected from the wind and wet weather, they should not need any additional heat even during the coldest time of year. While not necessary, adding heat to older birds will help them maintain egg production throughout the winter. Hens that are molting (Photo 3) may need some extra heat (and or protection) until their feathers grow back in.



Photo 3. Hens lose their feathers when molting and so will need extra heat or protection

- Gas heaters like propane and kerosene can be a fire hazard in a coop surrounded by flammable wood, bedding, and even feathers. Instead, consider heating lamps, bulbs, or other types of radiant heaters that have automatic shutoffs. However, you need to remain vigilant as even heating lamps can cause fires if not properly secured.

Ventilation

- Fresh air is important in order to provide oxygen for the birds as well as to remove carbon dioxide and moisture. Make sure that fresh air entering the building mixes with the internal (warmer) air before it gets to the birds.
- Ventilation is not only about adding fresh air but removing stale air. To allow ammonia and stale air to escape, be sure there is a vent or opening near the roof or ceiling of the coop to maintain air quality.

Water

- While water consumption typically declines in the winter, birds still need water to survive.
- Water that is frozen over is not available to the birds and they cannot break through the ice to access the water. So it is important to check/replace the water several times a day and make sure that it is not frozen and is available to the birds.
- Another alternative is to keep the water warm. This can be done by using a heater that goes under the waterer. This will then heat the water and keep it from freezing. This will require an electrical source. Another way to keep

water warm is to use a heat lamp so that it keeps the water warm. Be careful not to splash cold water on a hot heat lamp as the bulb may shatter. Be sure the heated base you choose will not melt or damage your water receptacle, or start a fire if it comes in contact the litter in the barn.

- Other useful tips to prevent frozen water include
 - Place black rubber tubs in sunlight because they:
 - Absorb the heat
 - Will not crack
 - Are easy to break the ice out if it forms
 - Keep water agitated
 - Ping pong balls will float and help keep water from freezing.
 - Soda bottle filled with salt water placed in the water bowl.
 - Create a sunroom using old windows or clear plastic. This acts as a greenhouse and will heat itself from sunlight

Feed

- Birds will require extra energy during cold weather months so feed needs to be available at all times.
- Treats and scratch grains that are high in energy can be given to them in the evening to help keep them warm all night. Suet cakes containing birdseed, fed sparingly, can provide a quality source of additional fat to the diet. Remember to limit to 10% of total feed intake.

Use deep litter to keep them warm

- In addition to providing insulation from the ground, deep litter also generates heat as it is broken down by microbial action. Three-to-four inches of pine shavings or straw bedding provides good insulation.



Figure 4. Heat lamps can provide warmth but must be carefully monitored to avoid fires

- Frostbite can be a problem for birds that have large combs, like Leghorns and Minorca's and other Mediterranean breeds. Petroleum jelly can be coated on combs and wattles to protect them from frostbite. Another option is to use a baby sock to cover the comb (like a glove) during cold times.
- Remember that bantam breeds do not produce the same amount of heat as large fowl breeds. Because of this, you may find that bantams require supplemental heat while your large fowl breeds seem perfectly comfortable.
- Waterfowl and turkeys are naturally climate hardy. Even in the coldest temperatures, ducks and geese will seek out water in which to swim. Be sure to provide liquid water deep enough for the birds to dunk and wash their heads.
- Remember, the wellbeing of your birds is your responsibility. Make sure to provide them with a safe place that is out of the weather and make sure they have access to food and water (not frozen) so that they can thrive through harsh winter weather.



Photo 5. Check/replace water often and make sure that it is not frozen.

Photo credits

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