

Don't let parasites vex your chickens

PRACTICE ABCs OF IPM (INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT) FOR A HEALTHY FLOCK

BY SCOTT SCHELL

Whether you have two birds or a thousand, managing poultry parasites begins with meeting your flock's basic needs. Provide sufficient food, water and shelter to reduce health stresses that make poultry more susceptible to disease, parasites or both.

In most cases, healthy animals living in conditions that mimic their natural habitat can tolerate low populations of parasites with no apparent health cost.

Chickens in a coop lack this advantage. Excellent care helps backyard chickens develop strong immune systems to suppress populations of parasites; however, ectoparasites, such as mites and lice, can still cause problems.

I is for Integrated

The "I" in IPM stands for integrated. This means don't rely on just one pest management tool for control. And remember, preventing problems is better than seeking cures.

Start with the coop. The number of birds in the flock determines minimum size. No overcrowding! Artificial light and perhaps a heat lamp inside will boost egg production and reduce environmental stresses on the birds in winter.

Sanitation is a key tool for managing the ectoparasites that feed on your birds. Even the cleanest coops accumulate feathers, dander and feces that can harbor pests, and parasites find cracks and crevices make excellent habitat. Whether you buy or build your chicken coop, make sure it is easy to clean and made of materials that can be sanitized.

Keep non-native species of wild birds, such as English sparrows, starlings and pigeons, out of your flock's living space. They can transmit parasites and pathogens to domestic poultry.

Practice good poultry manure management with complete removal and composting to

reduce poultry health problems vectored by litter beetles and filth flies.

Help chickens reduce some ectoparasite populations on their own by encouraging "dusting," a natural behavior in which they flap their wings and coat their feathers in dust. The simplest mix is half peat moss and half wood ashes in a plastic container, such as a dish pan.

P is for Pest

Identification of the pest is a critical step in IPM. The most common external parasites on chickens in Wyoming's cold, dry climate are lice and mites.

The red poultry mite, also known as a chicken mite, is a frequent pest in chicken coops. The Northern fowl mite is also common but differs from the red poultry mite in that it completes its life cycle on the birds.

Other ectoparasites that attack poultry are bed bugs and their relatives, such as the poultry bug and swallow bug.

Multiple species of black flies, commonly known as buffalo or turkey gnats, can affect poultry flocks living



Dirt flies as a chicken enjoys a summer dust bath. This natural behavior is how chickens clean their feathers.

close to rivers and streams. The black flies blood-feed heavily on the heads of turkeys and combs and wattles of chickens, causing extreme duress. Birds being attacked retreat into the coop, as the black flies prefer to feed in daylight and won't enter a dark shelter.

The options for treating parasites are many and varied. Once the pest is identified, you can select a treatment that matches your management philosophy. Start by consulting your veterinarian, your local UW Extension educator and extension publications.

M is for Management

Frequent, close visual examinations can help you catch problems early. The areas of the body the bird has difficulty preening are where parasites usually attack and feed first. Examine the vent (or more accurately, the cloaca), head and feet to find pests or signs of feeding damage on the skin.

Use a headlamp to examine the birds at night. Part the feathers to examine skin for mites, such as red poultry mites, that spend daylight hours off the birds and feed

only after dark. Another advantage of night mite checks? Chickens are easier to handle then.

The primary goal of a conscientious poultry keeper – on any scale – is to maintain healthy birds by meeting their basic needs of clean water, adequate nutritious food and shelter from inclement weather and predators.

“External Parasites of Poultry” by Jacquie Jacob of the University of Kentucky is an excellent resource for learning about common poultry parasites and treatment options. (<http://bit.ly/poultry-parasite>)

Watch this University of Wyoming Extension “From the Ground Up” video on backyard chickens at <http://bit.ly/backyard-poultry>.



**External
Parasites of
Poultry**



**Backyard
Chickens**

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Issued in furtherance of extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Glen Whipple, director, University of Wyoming Extension, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071.

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