All about Runs

*An extract from '**Practical Poultry**' by Chris Graham*

One of the key messages that we regularly emphasise to anyone new to the poultry-keeping hobby is the importance of planning. It may sound boring and a dull, tedious waste of time but, if you're serious about doing things right and ensuring that the birds you get enjoy life under the highest of welfare standards, then rushing into the whole business on a wing and a prayer is the worst thing you can do.

Small, ark-style units like this are designed to be moved on a daily basis, but are all too easy to overcrowd with birds.

Every aspect of what you're entering into requires careful thought. You must decide on the most suitable breed, the most appropriate type of housing, how you're going to look after them, who's going to do the work and when. Chickens are a commitment; they require regular and devoted care and attention, which can turn out to be a struggle for those leading busy, 9-5 lifestyles. What's more, the birds' surroundings must be right if they're to flourish, both mentally and physically.

Many newcomers fail to appreciate just how sensitive chickens are to stress, and what dramatic effects this can have on their general wellbeing.

One of the most common causes of stress among birds is overcrowding and, unfortunately, it's a common problem. New keepers, typically operating in limited space, can all too quickly fall into the trap of cramming too many birds into too small an area. Now, while this is usually done inadvertently, it's a hard fact we should all bear in mind. It becomes a particular concern when keepers start discovering the joys of home incubation. Stock numbers inevitably rocket, and lack of space very quickly becomes a serious issue.

Room to thrive

Many of you reading this may be surprised to learn that keeping just eight large fowl chickens under ideal conditions requires them to have a run area of at least 20x20m; a very large space if you pace it out, and probably bigger than the average suburban garden. Logic says that if you haven't got that amount of space available, then you keep correspondingly fewer birds, Unfortunately, though, logic often fails to make an appearance! Too many birds in an inadequate run represent an all too common welfare-related problem nowadays. So how much space have your chickens got? They can never have too much, but they can certainly have too little.

That's Run Rule No.l!

Poultry runs are vital areas that the birds use for exercise, supplementing their diets and keeping g occupied. At the most basic level they are incorporated into the hen house structure, creating a unit that's usually movable, but necessarily small. The next stage up from this is a free-standing run unit built from wood-framed, wire-meshed panels screwed or tied together. These can be butted up against the hen house, or used in isolation and whether or not a door is required is largely dependent on the size. Beyond this you're really looking at a fenced enclosure, which needs to be secure if you're serious about keeping foxes and other predators out.

This sort of wood frame-based run is easy to make and move. Convenient access is important and removable panels like this, rather than smaller, hinged doors, are most practical.

Building an effective poultry enclosure needs planning and budgeting; unfortunately, it's not a cheap exercise.

One of the most basic requirements of any poultry run or enclosure is that it offers the birds some shade when they need it. This is a vital factor for their overall welfare and contentedness. With all breeds thought to have descended from Jungle Fowl, today's chickens feel at their happiest when free-ranging in a woodland-type environment. Overhead cover — preferably trees or large shrubs —is the ideal but, of course, not all keepers can provide such luxurious surroundings.

This sort of plastic windbreak material can be an effective way of providing temporary shade for birds in small runs.

If there's no natural shade available in the area in which your birds are living, then you'll have to manufacture some; it's as simple as that. Even basic structures, with a solid, flat board roof will suffice. An added advantage of this approach is that it'll provide the ideal spot to create a dry dust bath (a necessity for helping birds deal with parasites). You can create this either using a natural depression in the earth, or with a large shallow box filled with dry, fine soil. The shelter will offer the birds a refuge from the heat of the summer sun, as well as something under which they can feel safe and secure. A chicken's worst nightmare is to be plonked down in the middle of an open field; they hate big skies. So never imagine that you're doing them a favour by locating the chicken run in a bright, airy part of your garden. If you have spare space available around trees and shrubs, then make use of that instead. The birds will thank you for it!

If you opt for the natural approach, evergreen bushes and trees (holly, for example) work well, as they offer maximum shade all year round. Fruit trees are good too, and the crops will inevitably benefit from the all the extra, natural fertiliser. But, at a practical level, try to avoid plants that are prickly or thorny. While this won't matter particularly to the birds, it'll certainly be a major factor for you when you're trying to catch them!

Floor coverings

There are few creatures as adept at clearing vegetation as the chicken. They love nothing better than scratching and pecking at fresh, young grass shoots, and digging for insects. However, the problem this creates for the keeper is that they'll quickly destroy virtually any vegetation they are given access to. I've seen compounds of three-foot high nettles demolished quicker than you'd ever imagine by just a handful of active hens! The upshot of this behaviour is that a luxuriant lawn will be converted into a muddy mess in a matter of days, which is why runs need to be either very large, or small enough to move around on a daily basis. Unfortunately, there's no type of grass that's tough enough to withstand a chicken onslaught. You'll get the best performance by sowing a ryegrass/clover mix, but even this won't survive the close confinement of birds. Don't buy seed from the local garden centre, go to a specialist, independent supplier instead for a better deal. Also, look out for an agricultural option called 'patching mix', which is what farmers use for re-seeding worn areas in fields; it's a mixture of ryegrass types and offers a very affordable option.

If you can give your birds natural shade then so much the better. Evergreens, like this holly, are particularly handy. However, avoid poisonous plants like laburnum and ivy for obvious reasons.

But if you simply don't have sufficient grass to allow for your birds to be rotated around from area to area then, rather than let them live on a bare, muddy surface, you should think about alternative ground cover such as gravel, shingle or wood chip.

As far as overall run shape is concerned, it seems that the one to avoid is a square. Studies into livestock behaviour have established this to be the worst and most unsettling shape for any sort of stock enclosure, including poultry runs. Animals and birds evidently feel more relaxed in a rectangular-shaped area than a square one.

Solid bracing like this is required on strainer posts, near gates and along particularly long fencing runs where additional strength is needed.

Fencing options

The generally accepted, ideal height for a chicken run fence is two metres, and this is what you should aim for if circumstances and budgets allow. I know, however that situations vary enormously, and so many of you will be forced to compromise on this for all sorts of practical reasons. However, the general principles remain the same, in terms of build quality and security, so use the following guide to the ideal set-up as a reference, picking out the aspects which are most relevant to your own situation.

The best approach to creating a two-metre high enclosure fence is to use two separate runs of wire mesh, rather than a single one; it's much easier to manage. The two 'strips' should be supported on straining wires strung between the posts. Post size and spacing are both important factors, if the fence is to remain tight, effective and durable. The rule of thumb is that the posts are spaced at 3m intervals. You must also place a strainer post at each corner, which is slightly thicker, and secured more firmly, than those down the sides.

Use 10x10cm or, at a push, 7.5x7.5cm tanalised timber for the strainer posts, and 5x5cm for the regular posts (deer fence posts are ideal).

The strainer posts will also need to be strutted with angled, solid timber braces for additional strength and support. Also, if you're building very long runs of straight enclosure fence, then you'll need to add in additional strainer posts every 60m or so. Strainer posts are set in concrete to a depth of three feet. The rest are sunk only two feet into the earth using a post hammer — concrete isn't necessary for the ordinary posts.

With the posts in place, dig a narrow trench all around the outside at the of the posts, into which you'll sink the fencing wire to depth of about 45cm, as an anti-digging measure. Use sturdy wire for the strainer, and fix three runs to the posts; one at ground level, the second about half way up and the third close to the top of the posts_ You'll need to set the positioning of these wires carefully, to allow for the buried depth of mesh at the base. These wires are then tightened using wire tensioners (available from fencing specialists). Attach the lower run of wire mesh first, all the way around the enclosure, clipping it at regular intervals to the lower two strainer wires. Repeat the process with the second run of mesh, attaching it to the middle strainer wire first, then hinging it up and clipping it securely to the top strainer. Then, if the posts ever move in the future, all you need to do is take up the slack with the wire tensioners to return the fence to its original tightness.

It's essential to use a wire tensioner like this on all strainer wires, to tighten them initially, and deal with any slack that may develop over time.

Of course, the fence is only going to be as good as the material you build it with. If you use poor quality timber and inadequate wire then it's just not going to do the required lob. Ideally, 2m-high perimeter fences built to surround a large compound, should incorporate two types of wire to provide a high-security barrier against predators.

Both layers of wire are mounted on the outside of the posts, for added security. A high-tensile deer fence provides the strength while a much finer, rabbit-type wire mesh provides a second security layer. Although the square-meshed deer fencing is certainly strong, and will keep your chickens inside the run, the gaps in its mesh are big enough to allow a determined fox through; and other indiscriminate killers such as the mink. This is why doubling-up with the rabbit mesh is so important. Either layer, on its own, couldn't be relied upon to provide the security needed.