

## Feature

# Get chicks off to a good start

Alan Beynon, vet at the St David's Practice in Exeter, explains why you should be obsessed with hygiene and temperature.

ALL PICTURES: ST DAVID'S POULTRY TEAM PRACTICE



Alan Beynon of the St David's Practice

WITH THE END OF THE SHOOTING SEASON, it is already time to consider the next rearing season.

There are many aspects that now need to be planned and, apart from ever-rising costs in the production of poults and pricing considerations, there is often a neglect of veterinary issues until disease challenges are upon us and another crisis needs to be managed.

### WHERE WILL THE BIRDS COME FROM?

The rearing cycle begins with gamekeepers gathering up hens and cocks for egg production or a decision to buy from abroad. The effect of the Euro and the current Newcastle Disease outbreak in Brittany are factors affecting choice, but where hens are gathered up, the veterinary aspects now need to be considered.

Many birds will have a worm burden and will require treatment through the food soon after penning. There may also be signs of mycoplasma (bulgy eye) that is caused by the stress of catching up and transport as well as possible mixing of sources – a habit best avoided!

### AVOIDING MYCOPLASMA

Many vets now recommend a treatment with an antibiotic at this stage to try to damp down the signs of mycoplasma as well as considering vaccination of breeders. The vaccination will not stop the signs of bulgy eye, but is effective in reducing the transmission of the disease to the offspring. Other strategies involve treating day-olds with medication if the adults are severely affected.

I do not advise catching up birds to use as breeding stock from a shoot that has had signs of mycoplasma; instead clear the shoot completely of game and send them for processing. Mycoplasma is transmitted through the egg to the offspring.

Talk to your veterinarian about setting up a treatment and vaccination strategy to eliminate the signs of disease in breeders and consider worms, mycoplasma, marble spleen and coronavirus nephritis.

Now it is time to think about your rearing programme for the year.

### HYGIENE

I always worry about water quality and advise that tanks and pipes are

The best temperature for chicks is 85°F.



Mycoplasmosis infection in a pheasant.

thoroughly cleaned with a good disinfectant. Water then needs to be tested to show that it's clean well before chicks are delivered. Even where new pipes are used each year, it is important to test that the system is clean.

### TEMPERATURE

Gas heaters should be serviced and tested and set up in the shed at the correct height to ensure a good spread of chicks. I am sure the majority of our "disease" issues in chicks are due either to transportation difficulties or that the birds are too hot.

I like to check the chicks' temperature with an infra-red, hand-held thermometer



and look at the spread of the birds – they will tell you if it's too hot or cold! As a general rule the "hot spot" needs to be 110°F and the best temperature for chicks is 85°F, which should be half way between the centre of the shed and the wall.

Last year's record was 163°F at the wall and the birds were scoured with 'rotavirus' and stunted. The same chicks on another site did well, but they also tested positive for rotavirus in the lab.

Many of my customers now use thermostatic heaters, which work well as they switch in when it's cold. However, birds can still get too hot on hot days; then you need to look at lifting roofs in small sheds or using mechanical ventilation in the larger units.

I use 'tiny talks' in sheds each year to look at temperature changes. These are small devices that record temperature and humidity every 15 minutes for the first week of life. Larger sheds used for brooding show less temperature fluctuation, and birds often do better in these in the early stages.

Being obsessive about temperature and hygiene in the first week of a chick's life is so important in the success of the

whole process through to release and the shoot days. Uneven, vent-pecked birds at 10 days old are a recipe for a big vet's bill and poor-performing poult. Attention to

husbandry detail now can save a lot of money through the year and offset some of the increased cost of gas and feed.

#### ST DAVID'S POULTRY TEAM AND ALAN BEYNON

St David's Poultry Team is one of the largest poultry practices in the UK, run by dedicated poultry vets and staff, to offer the highest standard of poultry and gamebird care. Its head office near Exeter in Devon covers England and Wales, with further branches in Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland. St David's Game Bird Services was developed as a specialist division by partner Alan Beynon in the late 1990s.

The practice's main aim has always been to provide an excellent service to all its gamebird clients and this is readily achieved by the combined knowledge and expertise of its team of vets. Alan's ethos has always been to be proactive rather than reactive, focusing on preventive measures and health planning to produce the highest quality of birds for flying. This proactive approach to his work has also radically changed the thinking of many game rearers and keepers and this holistic preventive approach has assisted in reducing stock losses and medication bills within this industry.

The practice advises and offers clients the following services: hatchery management, health planning and disease control, post mortem examinations for diagnostic and routine monitoring purposes, disinfection and biosecurity measures, water testing and analysis, modern dispensary services and, importantly, close communication between rearer and keeper to identify and rectify issues quickly.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, ALAN CAN BE CONTACTED ON 01392 872932 OR EMAIL [GAMESERVICES@STDAVIDS-VETS.CO.UK](mailto:GAMESERVICES@STDAVIDS-VETS.CO.UK)  
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