Breeding Problems - Fred Wright

With any luck we will have chicks in the nests by now, some will have left the boxes and be on the perches. Other pairs will have produced eggs – but things have gone wrong. Some pairs will even have done nothing – and still be sitting there looking at each other. This article is about sorting some of those problems.

Nest boxes – and concaves

There are an unlimited number of best box designs – inside the cabinets, outside – entrance holes at the top, the back or the side. All these different designs and still sometimes the hens will not enter them. Why?

First let's be sure the nest box doors are removed from the cabinets and the hens really can get into the boxes. It happens and it's always worth checking of the hens have not gone to nest.

If a hen has been bred in one sort of box – just sometimes she will never nest herself in a different design. If you buy birds in, its always worth checking the boxes where she was bred. If the hen does not go to nest – change the nest box design. It frequently works.

I have always taken the view that if a hen is fit – she will breed in any box. However, this year I have been proven wrong again. I used some extra all-wire cages and knocked up some simple boxes to be used on the floor of the cage with holes at the top. Many of the hens did not like them and would not use the boxes. I changed the boxes and the hens were into those boxes double-quick.

I always use a concave at the bottom of the nest box. It's a loose block with a concave shape removed from one end so the hens can lay their eggs and they don't roll around. I put a handful of sawdust on top and the hens rarely have a problem. I remove the concave when the chicks are rung, give the box a clean – and the concave. I find it just gives the chicks a bit more room in the box and as the chicks are about the leave the box, I clean it, replace the concave for the hen to start a second nest of eggs.

Recently it has become more common for fanciers not to use a concave and just give the hens a thick layer of sawdust at the bottom of the box. There is nothing wrong with that but if you find the hens don't manage to keep their eggs together, think about using the concaves again. For me it's always use a concave but it not using one works for you – stick with it.

Not going to nest

We have talked about the hens not going to nest due to the boxes but there are other reasons too. Sometimes the hens will just not be fit. If this is the case, return them to the flights and have a go with them later in the season – when they are ready for breeding.

Just sometimes we think a hen has not produced an egg but she might well be smashing it before we check the box. Always be on the look-out for the remains of a smashed egg. There are ways of drilling a large hole in the concave so the egg drops through onto a bed of soft sawdust but its only worth bothering about this if we really want to get eggs from the hen.

If a hen has not entered the box or showed any signs of interesting in the box within three weeks, I would return her to the flight and try again in a few weeks.

Clear eggs

Getting clear eggs is a regular problem. These are actually infertile eggs and when held up to the light after a few days (four days) look "clear". If they were fertile we would see a chick being formed and the red lines of the blood supply would be visible.

Clear eggs are caused by many reasons. The cock might not have mated with the hen, he may not be producing sperm (not be fit) and the hen may have entered the box so quickly that the cock did not get a chance to mate with her.

You have to make the decision – let her nest again or release the pair and try again later. I usually let the pair go again so long as they appear fit. I remove the clear

eggs, block off the entrance hole for a few days so they can mate – and then open up the hole and let them go again. It usually works second time! It's the eggs are clear again – I put both birds back into the flight and use the cabinet for another pair.

Dead in shell

There are different sorts of dead in shell. These are fertile eggs that have "gone wrong". True dead in shell is when the chick if fully formed inside the egg and it just cannot break through the shell enough to escape. It might be the chicks is too weak, it might be the shell is too think and someone has been over zealous with the calcium supplements.

There is a belief which I subscribe to in that the atmosphere can be too dry and the humidity is low. This dries out the egg and the chick fails to hatch. Others have talked about much dead in shell is due to poor ventilation in a bird room. In the past I have always dismissed this understanding, until I attended a seminar with Jeff Attwood a top UK fancier well known to Australian fanciers, He talked about visiting a commercial hatchery some years ago and was told dead in shell was significantly due to poor ventilation. This registered with me but it was not until this year when I was not using my large extractor fans in the breeding room due to having them renovated. This year I experienced a fair bit of dead in shell early in the season. I put the fans back into action and suddenly the dead in shell problem disappeared.

The other form of dead in shell is where the chicks partly form and then dies at the development stage. This is due to a couple of reasons. I believe a hen that fidgets on the eggs does that, it also happens when the cock is frequently inside the box when the hen is incubation. He disturbs the hen and seems to play with the eggs. All this is enough to kill off the developing chicks.

The final form of dead in shell is caused by bacteria, either from a dirty/unclean box, or from the fingers of the fancier. Our hands always carry bacteria, so wash your hands before touching eggs, use those difficult to use "egg lifters" or use those very thin rubber gloves. Better still, try not to touch the eggs unless there is a very good reason. These bacteria enter through the shell and gasses the chicks with hydrogen

sulphide. It's that characteristic smell of "bad eggs". If you chicks die in forming and there is an unpleasant smell – think bacteria and do something about it.