



## Managing poultry cannibalism in Kenya

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### Abstract

*Introduction:* Poultry farming is a potentially highly profitable enterprise that can be easily undertaken at small, medium or large-scale levels. In Kenya there is an expanding market for eggs and chicken meat, especially in urban areas. The ready availability of markets has encouraged many farmers to invest in poultry business. The major constraints encountered by farmers are high feed costs, poor and fluctuating feed quality, unstable markets and prices for products and the risk of disease outbreaks.

*Observations:* In March 2008 serious cannibalism was observed in our privately managed poultry unit located at Limuru (about 40km North-West of Nairobi). At the time of the outbreak the poultry unit had 550 layers. Of these, 150 birds belonged to a separate one-year-old batch, which had progressed through the various stages without exhibiting any cannibalism. The rest, which exhibited cannibalism, belonged to a 5-6 month-old batch, which had just commenced laying. Day old chicks for both batches had been procured from the well reputed hatchery (Kenchic) and provided with feed from an equally well reputed and reliable manufacturer (Unga Ltd).

<http://www.e-conference.elewa.org/agriculture>.



Cannibalism was expressed as attacks on chicken initially on the head (comb) and later on the rear (vent) as the number of laying birds increased. Once a wound was opened, numerous chicken would gang up to attack the injured one until death or rescue. The wounds inflicted were very severe, characterized by loss of the entire top of the head or opening up of large holes around the vent, which often resulted in death of the victim. The birds went on to feed on the dead bird's flesh, until it was removed. Within one month about 25 birds died due to cannibalism, while over 30 more were rescued with serious injuries and had to be kept in a separate house to recover. Wounds on the rescued birds were treated with an oxytetracycline spray to enhance healing.



Figure 1: The rear body part of a layers bird badly injured after attack by other chicken.

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*Management measures:* Initially it was thought that the birds were attacking each other due to poor quality of feeds, probably due to a deficiency of a critical element. Feed was thus supplemented with grit, which was placed in bowls and kept inside the poultry house. However, the provision of grit appeared to provide a temporary reprieve since cannibalism resumed after a while. Other measures undertaken included trimming and blunting of the beaks. Upon further enquiry and literature search it was learnt that there are particular breeds of birds that are more prone to attacking each other, especially when opportunities present themselves. This could happen, for example, when a chicken is laying and it exposes its bright colored rear parts of the body. It was observed that top cannibalizers would gather around the laying boxes waiting for the exposed bird to start pecking on it.



Figure 2: A bird with its head injured after attack by other chicken.



In further attempts to stop the loss of chicken, a decision was made to place the laying boxes near walls and in such a way that only the laying bird would be able to enter, and leaving insufficient surrounding space for any would be cannibalizers. Light was also reduced around the laying boxes so that chicken outside would not be able to see others clearly. In addition, to keep the chicken occupied, leaves and stalks of plants, e.g. green napier, maize stalks, green bean plants and banana leaves were placed within the poultry house to keep the chicken busy foraging. These measures have considerably reduced incidences of attacks. It is important to ensure there is feed in the troughs especially in the morning when the birds are more hungry and likely to turn on each other.

*Conclusion:* Our experience shows that cannibalism can inflict serious economic harm on poultry enterprises if not managed effectively. Farmers need to be more aware of how to detect and manage this condition so as to protect their investments. Chicken breeders should avoid genetic elements that may be responsible for chicken cannibalism while commercial hatcheries should ensure they use only parental stock without such undesirable traits. Considering that this experience is from one farm only, it would be prudent for government or other research agency to carry out a survey to determine the extent of chicken cannibalism in Kenya. Better policies and more stringent enforcement of existing ones is necessary for continued and sustained growth of the poultry sector in Kenya.

**A poster on the same topic with more images is accessible for free download through the leCAB 2008 web portal.**