



Managing poultry cannibalism in Kenya

Sarah Muthoni and Maina Mwangi,

BioSciences Business Units, FaCT Limited, P.O. Box 967 Post Code 00217 Limuru, Kenya. [Poster presented at the International e-Conference on Agricultural BioSciences 2008](#) (www.e-conference.elewa.org/agriculture). Author email: sarah@elewa.org;

Telephone +254710873341

Introduction

Poultry farming is a 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. Good market 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 and the risk of disease outbreaks. Cannibalism is reported here as a major threat to poultry production, following recent observations in a private farm in Kenya.

Observations

In March 2008 serious cannibalism was observed in a 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 a well reputed hatchery (Kenchic) and provided with feed from an equally well reputed and reliable manufacturer (Unga Ltd).



Figure 1: Birds with rear body part and heads badly injured after attack by other chicken.

Injuries and losses: Cannibalism was expressed as chicken attacking each other initially on the head (comb) and later on the rear (vent) as the number of laying birds increased. Once a wound was opened, numerous chickens would gang up to attack the injured bird until it died or was rescued. 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 (Figure 1), which often resulted in death of the victim. The attackers proceeded to feed on the victims' flesh after death. 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 sprayed with oxytetracycline to enhance healing.

Management measures:

- ✓ Based on assumption that cannibalism was arising due to a nutritional deficiency, feed supplemented with grit, which was placed in bowls and kept inside the poultry house. Thus measure provided only temporary reprieve since cannibalism resumed after a while. Beaks were also trimmed and made blunt.
- ✓ 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. In this farm, the most aggressive cannibalizers were observed gathering around the laying boxes waiting for a bird to expose the vent.
- ✓ 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, leaving insufficient space around 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 regularly placed within the poultry house to keep the chicken busy foraging.
- ✓ 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. These measures have almost completely reduced incidences of cannibalism.

Conclusion

- 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 early.
- While more research is needed, breeders should avoid genetic elements that could cause cannibalism.
- Commercial hatcheries should ensure they use only parental stock without undesirable genetic traits.
- Regular surveys are needed to determine the extent and causes of chicken cannibalism in Kenya.
- Policy support is needed to ensure continued and sustained growth of the poultry sector in Kenya.