

Reducing Injurious Feather Pecking In a Developing Organic Egg Enterprise



Orchard Organic Farm is a 20ha Soil Association Certified Farm in Devon with a layer enterprise, cereals and apples. The majority of the eggs are sold to a large box scheme. The laying hen enterprise comprises a total of 2,500 birds split into five, five hundred bird flocks. The breeds include a mixture of Black Rock, Silver Links and Brown Nicks. All birds are fully beaked. There are 5 McGregor mobile houses – 3 x 500 bird houses and 2 x 720 bird houses, all housing 500 birds. The producer and their customers are strong believers in the benefits of 500 bird flocks. Each house has its own range area of 5,890 sq/m to 6,480 sq/m. Each range is divided into two where the birds are alternated monthly, to allow the range, a tough mixed grass and clover seed ley to recover and to reduce the risk of the range becoming stale. The houses are moved to entirely fresh pasture after each batch and fields ploughed behind. The producer identified some feather loss issues and decided to participate in the University of Bristol Pecking Project and to assist in the development of the AssureWel study, to identify potential causes and gain support and advice in reducing and preventing feather pecking in future.

The mature range as a model for good practice

Artificially constructed field shelters and apple trees provide cover on the mature range. The birds in this flock range and forage more, using the whole expanse of the field. The feather cover is good in this flock. This demonstrates the importance of a diverse and attractive range with tree cover to promote foraging behaviour and reduce feather pecking.



Management strategies that were implemented to improve the younger ranges



Planting trees to increase natural cover and diversity for the hens, including dust bathing opportunities



Spreading corn and forage to initially encourage the hens

OUT (ensuring corn is not left on the ground to attract wild birds or rodents)



Spreading non-rolled corn in the litter to increase foraging behaviour plus good quality scratch (using woodchip and straw)



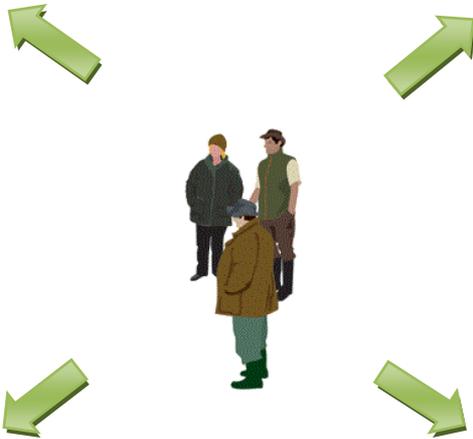
Lights are turned off earlier to closer mimic natural daylight



While the trees take time to mature, **artificial shelter** provide greater protection from the wind and sun and encourage birds to range further away from the sheds.



Earlier flocks had a mix of black and white birds, which resulted in some aggression between the breeds (Black Rocks being bullied by Silver Links). Only **single colour flocks** will be run in the future.



Consider **stocking density**. 500 birds in a 720 bird sized house compared provides more scratch space, and less competition over resources such as nest boxes and perch space than the 500 birds in a 500 bird house.



Regularly **assessing, recording and monitoring** the hens' feather condition (AssureWel), as well as careful monitoring of egg production.



Increasing foraging opportunities by using vegetation on the range and creating longer foraging time by using course meal.

Dust-bathing areas are **rotavated** to ensure good quality, friable litter for the hens to work at.

