

CASE STUDY

Working in partnership to minimise floor eggs

Alex Watts, 26, runs Naunton Farm in Naunton Beauchamp near Worcester with his brother Chris. It is a 68-acre commercial free-range laying farm with three Big Dutchman 264 houses containing 32,000 Lohmann Brown and 16,000 Hyline birds.

Alex works in close partnership with Poultry Specialist James Wilson, Humphrey Feeds and Pullets field representative for the Welsh borders area. Covering such a wide area, James is exposed to a broad range of issues across a variety of farms, using that wider view of the industry to make a real difference to Alex and his flocks.

“James has been with us from the start” said Alex. “It’s all

about attention to detail and he sees a lot more farms than we do. He has the data so we can see what works elsewhere and he’s well placed to advise us if we have a problem.”

Dealing with floor and system eggs

One of the biggest challenges faced by all poultry farmers is to minimise floor egg numbers, which can bite into profits.

A floor/system egg percentage greater than 5% can make a flock unprofitable. Alex works hard with James to reduce floor eggs and believe that good bird husbandry is key.

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Focusing on certain behaviours, they encourage the birds' instincts to use nest boxes by carrying out the following practices:

Removing floor eggs immediately to prevent habit reinforcement

A regular presence in each house, especially as birds come in to lay, is essential. When the current flock arrived in January 2019 Alex and his staff each patrolled a shed every 30 minutes, checking floors and system surfaces for birds and hand collecting eggs in baskets.

Adjusting lighting patterns as daylight hours change

Alex adjusts lighting patterns as daylight hours change. "Chickens seem to tell when it's light outside," he said. "If they wake up and it's still dark in the shed, they will lay on the system wherever they perch."

Removing dark spots

Birds look for warm, dark areas of the house to lay in, so Alex ensures the lighting system in each shed removes any darker areas and incorporates rope lights to eliminate shadows.

Opening and closing nest boxes

Conversely, nest boxes are kept reassuringly dark behind plastic

curtain flaps and as draught free as possible.

The nests are closed when the birds are housed and then progressively opened as they approach sexual maturity. The action of opening and closing the nest boxes encourages the birds to investigate the nests.

Preventing birds from sleeping on scratch areas

"We do not let birds sleep on the scratch area," said Alex. "For the first week or so we will be in the house before the lights go off making sure no hens go to sleep on the scratch area. This ensures the birds wake up on the system, near food and water, and near a nest box."

Feeding birds 15 minutes after they wake

Feeding times are important. Alex feeds his birds 15 minutes after they wake, to keep them near their nest boxes, but he is also careful not to distract them: "If the feeder is on during the peak laying period the noise can drag birds out of their nest box."

“It's all about attention to detail and he sees a lot more farms than we do.”

Partnership with the pullet supplier

The birds come from Humphrey Feeds and Pullets. "On our rearing farm we grew the pullets to 16 weeks on a similar system, with feed and water on different levels so they became used to moving up and down prior to arriving on the laying farm," adds James. "We know that when they first come into lay the birds don't know what to do so they drop eggs here, there and everywhere but if we've done a good job rearing them, then the floor egg problem isn't as tedious as it could be."

Clearly, this requires a lot of time and effort in the sheds, spotting and staying on top of potential problems. However, a typical flock at Naunton Farm which starts out laying around 10% floor/system eggs can be brought down to around 0.5% by peak production.

Those statistics are the measure not only of Alex's dedication and hard work but of the successful partnership he enjoys with Poultry Specialist James Wilson and Humphrey Feeds and Pullets.



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