

# KEEPING YOUR BIRDS COOL IN THE SUMMER

By K. J. Theodore



## *HEAT PROSTRATION*

### KEEP YOUR COOL, FOOL...

The 'fool' I'm talking about is me. Heat prostration is a serious problem during the summer in most states. It can also be a problem any time in certain areas of the country where warmer climate, inadequate ventilation, or an enclosed building where the sun beats on a non-reflective roof all day blend to create a deadly environment for your birds.

High temperatures alone can cause heat prostration, but the combination of high heat and humidity are particularly dangerous. Young birds and those in production usually succumb first, but I've seen one-year-old cockerels take heat and humidity particularly hard.

Birds have no sweat glands. They cool themselves by rapid respiration with their mouths open and by holding their wings just slightly out to the sides of their bodies to cool the inside of their wing web. If you pick up a bird that is suffering from the heat, feel under their wing where there are no feathers and the main wing artery lies. Those who have their birds tested for NPIP will know the location. This area will be very hot to the touch - as if the bird is running a fever. He probably is; but more importantly, he's suffering from heat prostration and needs immediate help.

The first thing you need to do is to make sure the bird's skin under the wing is clean and healthy. This is an area of the skin that enables a bird to cool itself, so you want to make sure it can do its job and be able to 'breathe'. Dirt, hardened debris, scabs, oily products, etc. will prevent your bird from being able to cool down. Wash the area clean with a little baby shampoo and cool water if necessary.

If the area under the wing is clean and healthy, then proceed right to a bucket of cool water. Dunking the bird can be 'shocking' to an already stressed bird, so I recommend that you begin by taking a clean rag, dipping into the bucket of water, and squeezing the cool water onto the skin under each wing. Do this several times on each side and let the cool cloth sit there for a few minutes between fresh rinses. When the bird has stopped fussing and has decided that this isn't a bad thing after all, then hold him securely and dip the bottom half of his body - belly, vent area, some of his chest, and his feet - into the bucket of cool water. Don't 'wring' him out - leave him dripping.

The next thing to do is to make sure that his housing has adequate ventilation. You need air flow during hot weather. It helps the birds get their body temperatures down when they open their wings to get themselves cool. If they free-range, let them free after their 'dip'. If they're in a coop, you may have to use a fan to move the air around if you

don't already have a ventilating system. Once I've cooled the birds off with the water, I usually stand them in front of the fan for a few minutes with their wings up for the evaporating effect. This creates a rapid cooling.

For those with very large flocks, I recommend the use of a fogger. You can mist the entire coop and the birds with clear water for a very effective cooling effect. If you have Oxine at home, you can kill two birds with one stone (I know, cruel saying for bird owners), and eliminate all molds, bacteria, and viruses at the same time. Large commercial growers use misters in the poultry houses to keep the birds cool - similar to fogging.

If you don't own a fogger, and you're willing to make the mess, hosing down the floors and walls of the coop is effective in cooling down the whole building.

Sometimes during heat prostration, an electrolyte imbalance can occur. If you have Gatorade, give it to them. Electrolytes are essentially minerals and most good water-soluble vitamin and mineral supplements for poultry will do the trick. If they've stopped drinking though, you may have to drench the fluid into them.

I can't stress enough the need for clean, fresh water to be available to your birds at all times, especially on hot, humid days. If the weather is particularly hot, cool water is best because if the water is allowed to stand even for a short period of time and get warm, sometimes the birds won't drink it. I own and have been around horses for many years and a lot of the things we do to cool them down are the same for poultry. We usually hose them off and leave them drenched. If possible, we then turn them out onto pasture, as opposed to keeping them in a stall with no ventilation. One of the most important things we do though is to make sure that the drinking water doesn't become warm. They won't drink it if it does.

*For those of you who read this far, you get a reward. You get to find out how I was a 'fool'. I'm always trying out new products so I can recommend them if they're safe and effective. I recently had the opportunity to try out a different poultry spray for the control of parasites (not that my birds have any, mind you), and I made the mistake of applying a spritz of it under each wing. I did this because this is what the manufacturers of poultry dust recommend you do. I almost lost a good bird because I did that. There was a bad reaction between the product and the skin under the wing. The skin hardened and turned yellow and was no longer 'breathing'. Because of this, the bird could not cool himself down when he opened his wing. Once I gently removed the peeling skin to uncover his new skin underneath, I was able to cool him down with the cool water. If I had assumed that his skin was healthy under his wing without looking and just dunked him in water, it would have had a limited effect. I realize this is a different subject, but don't use liquid parasites sprays under the bird's wings. In fact, don't use it anywhere on the skin itself, only on the feather. Even the pyrethrum-based insecticides, which are relatively safe to use on poultry, should only be used on the feathers themselves. If you need something for the vent area, then I recommend you use the poultry dust in that location, and the liquids for feather mite - if you prefer the liquids.*