

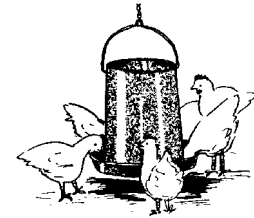


The University of Georgia

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BACKYARD FLOCK TIP...

THE PECK ORDER

The social organization in flocks is an integral part of the day-to-day life experience of chickens. What may seem to be nearly constant aggression among individuals in a flock serves the purpose -- to reduce aggression. Synonymous terms for social organization are social hierarchy and dominance hierarchy. The peck order serves two very important purposes in a flock of chickens: (1) it reduces tension and (2) it reduces wasted energy.

The peck order provides the framework for regular and predictable relationships among flock mates. In forming the peck order, a variety of behaviors can be seen including attack, escape, avoidance, dominance, and submissiveness. These activities vary in intensity and can be recognized by difference in posture and movement. After the establishment of the peck order, potentially harmful aggression in a flock is dramatically reduced. Instead of outright fighting among individuals the birds maintain their relationships by threats and avoidance. Chickens in backyard flocks not only have the ability to recognize and remember each other, but they also remember their status in the social hierarchy. After the peck order is established, every chicken knows its place. Establishment of the social order may take a few hours to a day depending on group size. This is how tension and wasted energy are reduced. Threats, avoidance, and head and body posture maintain the peck order.

In observing a flock of chickens, it will be noted that the subordinate (lower ranking) individuals keep their heads lower than their dominant neighbors. This posture communicates their submissiveness to the more dominant chickens. Relaxation of submissive posture by a subordinate individual is a stimulus for attack by nearby higher-ranking individuals. Interestingly, larger combs confer higher social rank upon individuals which means that among comb types, birds with single combs will usually rank higher in the social hierarchy than birds with other comb types.

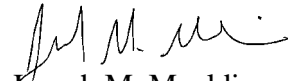
PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

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Generally, there are three different aspects of social order going on at the same time in a flock of chickens. Males establish strong social organization among themselves; females also form their own social order; and males generally dominate females in a passive way (i.e. roosters don't need to make any special effort to induce submission by hens).

A basic understanding of the social organization of chickens is very important to the production of meat and eggs. Tension in a flock and the resulting wasted energy and injuries due to fighting can take their toll in production performance. Flocks kept from establishing a peck order by frequent changes in flock membership, will be under such strife that resistance to certain infectious diseases may be lowered dramatically. It is advisable not to change flock structure frequently. When new chickens are introduced to a flock, it is best to keep light levels low so that the birds do not readily recognize the new individuals. Also, when the flocks resources are limited (food, water, space), social tension will be increased. Make sure that there are plenty of these resources.

The principles of social behavior of chickens are more applicable to birds that are older than six to eight weeks of age. This is because the formation of peck orders does not begin until this time.



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****Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes.****

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”