

Avoiding frostbite!!

We are having a harsh winter this year and a concern I have seen popping up is frostbite on birds. Luckily with our crested breeds their combs are often covered with feathers, or at least close to the head. The bearded varieties fair a little better with their lack of wattles, or very small ones. However, our non-bearded birds will have more issues with possible frostbite.

Winterizing your coop is important when you live in a colder climate, living in MI when it came time to set up my coop this year- I chose to spend extra money and insulate the coop. My coop is really a 2 story detached 2 car garage with an addition on the back- the chickens have the main level of the garage area. I put in roll insulation and added walls, this is not a feasible option for everyone. I also have a plug-in oil radiator type heater in the coop to keep it above freezing, some people use heat lights- I prefer the plug in radiator style ones as they are "safer". I don't wish to have to truck water out every few hours when temps drop, and as a nurse- I work 12-17 hours a day away from home 3-4 days a week.

Some people with small coops put straw bales around the outside of the coop to help insulate it. If your coop is large enough, I have friends with a shed who have put foam board to insulate with and a wall liner to keep birds from pecking the foam out. Most people I know in Michigan though- just have sturdy wood coops with no insulation. They make sure they are draft free in the birds living area while making sure there is still decent air flow to let moisture out. Having a humid coop make the birds prone to frostbite, as well as respiratory issue when the temps drop. This is super important- lack of ventilation leads to more humidity in the coop, which leads to increased risk of frostbite. You don't want drafts on the birds- but they NEED ventilation even in the winter. Moisture in the air can lead to frostbite- this is one reason why single comb birds can lose comb tips in the winter, that is not from drinking water- that is poor ventilation if it happens in the coop.

The single biggest issue with frostbite is moisture, wet and damp skin that gets very cold. Our bird's wattles are thin. When they dip them in the water while drinking, and it is very cold- they have higher chances of frostbite. Unless your coop is heated, it is better to have small openings for water containers. This of course means you have to either supply heated waterers, or change them out several times a day if your coop is not heated. Even with heated waterers, your birds can dip their wattles in the water and get frostbite before it dries on very cold days.

Another way to help combat frostbite is when picking breeding stock, picking birds that have smaller wattles will help in the long run. Most show breeders select for smaller wattles on their birds, but on a superior animal will accept larger than desired wattles.

Some people also apply Vaseline or Vet Rx to the wattles to help repel water when wattles dip into drinking water. I have never tried this, it sounds time consuming with as many birds as I have.

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