

# Poultry Catching and Handling

## SUMMARY

The consumption of poultry in the UK has increased steadily over recent years and the total number of broiler chickens slaughtered annually now exceeds 800 million. In addition, 40 million end-of-lay hens, 32 million turkeys and 8 million ducks are slaughtered. The slaughter process begins when these birds are caught and handled on farm for transportation to the processing plant.

During catching, rough, aggressive techniques will result in poultry panicking and becoming distressed and injured. Once caught, birds must be handled with care and consideration. Bone breaks, joint dislocations and bruising can be common injuries which will result in unnecessary suffering and may lead to carcase downgrading and financial loss.

This leaflet focuses on the humane methods available for the manual capture and handling of broilers, end-of-lay hens, turkeys, ducks, geese and quail. It aims to provide constructive, practical advice to maximise bird welfare.

**All staff involved in the catching and handling of poultry must be trained appropriately and be made aware that the mistreatment of birds will not be tolerated.**



## Legislation

The legislation covering the welfare of birds whilst being caught and handled includes:

- *Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 & UK Welfare of Animals (Transport) Orders*
- *The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 (as amended) (WASK '95)*

In all this legislation, the general principle concerning catching and handling birds is that anyone involved in the catching and handling of poultry has a legal obligation to avoid injury and unnecessary suffering and to ensure the safety of the birds during transport, loading and unloading.

## Pre-catching

Before catching begins, it is important to ensure that the vehicle transporting the birds to the processing plant is suitably positioned for easy loading and unloading of the transport containers. The containers must be clean, dry (particularly important in freezing weather), free from damage and suitable for the size and type of bird being collected.

The vehicle driver should be trained and competent to transport birds and must be aware of his/her responsibility to protect the welfare of the birds. This must include knowledge of what to do in different weather conditions (eg hot/cold), in an emergency or in the case of a breakdown.

All passageways and doorways should be cleared to allow free movement of personnel; house lighting should be reduced to the lowest acceptable level or blue lighting used.

The catching team must have received training in correct bird handling techniques and welfare. Inexperienced catchers must be closely supervised by an experienced operator. The catching team must be easily contactable by staff at the processing plant to ensure catching only begins if the slaughter equipment is fully functioning and enough space is available in the lairage for the number of birds being caught.



## General requirements

- Water must be available to the birds right up to the point of catching and periodically available for birds waiting to be caught, depending upon the length of time of the catching operation.
- Feed should be withdrawn for no longer than 12 hours prior to slaughter, with the timing of this planned in consultation with the person who schedules processing at the plant.
- Before catching begins, the transport containers should be placed as close as possible to the group of birds being caught. This will help ensure carrying distances from the catching area to the crate or module are kept to a minimum.
- Birds must be approached quietly and calmly, in order to minimise disturbance. To avoid herding or driving poultry, loose-housed birds can be confined by mobile catching frames before they are caught.
- Once caught, birds must be handled with care and consideration. Bone breaks, dislocations and bruising are common injuries which can occur in the pre-slaughter period resulting in unnecessary suffering, carcass downgrading and financial loss.
- Care must be taken to avoid hitting any part of the bird against solid objects. If any bird escapes it should be re-caught immediately and as quietly as possible.
- Visibly unfit or injured birds should not be loaded into a transport container but must be killed on-farm as quickly and humanely as possible by a suitably trained person.
- Care must be taken to ensure injury does not occur to birds while pushing drawers into module frames or closing the doors of fixed crates. Module drawers must be filled from the top drawer to the bottom to avoid the possibility of injuring birds in the tray below when returning drawers to their original position.
- If birds are to be unloaded from transport containers whilst alive, the container design should allow handlers to remove birds gently and easily without pulling them across the floor of the container. Care must be taken to ensure injury does not occur when birds are removed from containers with narrow openings.

## Catching

Although the Humane Slaughter Association (HSA) recommends that adult birds should be handled and supported individually, it is acknowledged that this is not always a practical option in a commercial environment. For example, chickens should be handled by placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings, and lifting the bird. However the majority of broilers are commercially caught by one leg and more than one bird is carried in each hand. If chickens are to be caught in this way, the HSA recommends that, due to welfare implications, **best practice is to catch by both legs**. The HSA recognises this recommendation may cause considerable economic challenges but urges the industry, worldwide, to explore ways of moving towards the change.

Double leg catching is also a recommendation within Defra's *Welfare Code for Meat Chickens and Breeding Chickens* and the *Welfare Code for Laying Hens*. Welfare codes are not law, but failure to follow their provisions may be used as evidence in court when a prosecution is taken for causing unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress to livestock.

Care should still be taken when catching by both legs to ensure that the bird's shanks are held side-by-side within the catcher's hand. This stops the bird's legs crossing over in the hand and digging in, thereby reducing any pain or discomfort to both the bird and the catcher.

All guidance listed below is for the catching and handling of large flocks being transported by crate or module to the processing plant. The method of handling depends on the species of bird being caught and each is considered separately.



## Chickens

### Broilers and loose-housed end-of-lay hens

- Birds should be caught by grasping the legs around the lower shanks (just above the feet). They should be caught by **both legs** to avoid injury or suffering.
- Once caught, the bird should be lifted gently, with its head hanging downward, and transferred to the transport container.
- If any bird starts flapping during capture, gently rest its breast against the side of your leg for a few seconds. This helps to calm the bird and reduce wing flapping.
- When birds are carried in groups, care should be taken to ensure that they can be held comfortably and without causing the bird distress or injury. As a guide, no more than three chickens should be carried in one hand.
- Birds should be lowered gently into the transport containers, onto their breasts and allowed to regain their balance before further birds are added to the tray.
- Chickens must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing or tail.

### Caged end-of-lay hens

- Caged hens should be caught by grasping the legs around the lower shanks (just above the feet). They should be caught by **both legs** to avoid causing the bird injury or suffering.
- Birds must be removed from the cage individually.
- The bird's breast should be supported during removal from the cage, or a breast support slide used.
- Once removed, the bird may be placed directly into the transport container or handed to a second person to transfer it to the container.
- If any bird starts flapping during capture, gently rest its breast against the side of your leg for a few seconds. This helps to calm the bird and reduce wing flapping.
- If birds are carried in groups after removal from the cage, care should be taken to ensure that they can be held comfortably and without distress or injury. As a guide, no more than three hens should be carried in one hand.
- The birds should be lowered gently into the transport containers onto their breasts and allowed to regain their balance before further birds are added to the tray.
- Hens must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing or tail.

## Turkeys

- **Never** lift a turkey by a single leg. Small growing turkeys (7–14 weeks old) should be caught by holding **both legs**, lowering the bird onto its breast and lifting, while holding your arm over one wing to prevent flapping.
- Adult turkeys (14–21 weeks old) should be lifted by grasping the shoulder of the wing furthest away from you, while your free hand grips the legs. The turkey should then be lifted and held close to your body.
- Adult turkeys can also be caught and carried by both shoulder joints.
- Once caught, the bird should be loaded into the crate or module head first, taking care to ensure that the keel of the bird does not impact with the front lip of the container. Any impact may result in breast bruising which is painful to the bird and likely to cause downgrading at the processing plant.
- Turkeys must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing or tail.



## Ducks and geese

- Poor catching and handling can easily lead to ducks and geese becoming lame, therefore they should **never** be carried by the legs.
- Ducks should be handled by placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings, and lifting the bird.
- Geese should be handled by placing one arm around the body and lifting the bird under the armpit, whilst the other hand carefully holds onto the neck.
- Adult geese may also be caught and carried by both shoulder joints.
- Ducks and geese must not be lifted, held suspended or carried by the neck unless, at the same time, the breast of the bird is fully supported as well. Care must be taken to ensure the bird's windpipe is not obstructed when lifting it by the neck.
- Ducks and geese should be lowered gently into the transport containers onto their feet and allowed to regain their balance before further birds are added to the tray.
- Ducks and geese must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, wing, tail or leg.

## Quail

- There is a high risk of bone breakage and birds should **never** be carried by the legs.
- Quail are very flighty birds, so the openings to transport containers need to be small enough to stop birds flying back out of the container.
- Quail should be lifted by placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings with the legs hanging free.
- Quail should be lowered gently into the containers onto their feet.
- Quail must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing, tail or leg.

## Further reading

*The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995* (as amended) HMSO 1995  
*EC Regulation 1/2005 & the UK Welfare of Animals (Transport) Orders* HMSO 2006  
Full details of all legislation can be found on [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk) and <http://europa.eu>  
*Practical Slaughter of Poultry - A Guide for the Small Producer* (2nd Edition) HSA 2001

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