

Technical Note No 15

Manual 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 in 2025 was approximately 1.1 billion. In addition, approximately 30 million end-of-lay hens, 7 million turkeys and 10 million ducks were slaughtered. The slaughter process begins when poultry are caught and handled on farm, for transportation to the slaughterhouse. Humane catching and handling are also important for on-farm killing and depopulation events.

Rough, aggressive catching can result in poultry panicking and becoming distressed and injured. Bone breaks, joint dislocations and bruising can be common and result in birds suffering, carcass downgrading and financial loss. Handling birds with care and consideration can reduce these problems.

This leaflet focuses on humane methods for the manual capture and handling of broilers and end-of-lay chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guinea fowl and quail. This document aims to provide constructive, practical advice to maximise bird welfare during catching in a prominently **commercial setting**. Although the information is also relevant to small-scale producers and poultry owners, more detailed guidance for these operations is available in our online guide: [Practical Slaughter of Poultry](#)

All staff involved in the catching and handling of poultry must be trained appropriately and be made aware of their obligation to ensure the safety of the birds during loading for transport. The mistreatment of birds must not be tolerated.

The HSA can provide training in poultry catching and handling for commercial operations and smallholders. Contact training@hsa.org.uk for more information.

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UK and EU legislation

Some areas and countries have legislation to protect animal welfare during transport, slaughter and killing. It is therefore critical that readers of this Technical Note are aware of all the rules in their country of operation, and any country to which they export products.

In the UK and EU, the key legislation relating to poultry catching and handling is *Council Regulation (EC) 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations* and *Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing*. The major provision of the latter regulation is that **animals shall be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing and related operations (e.g. handling, lairage, restraint, stunning and bleeding)**.



For more information about *Council Regulation (EC) 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations*, see [HSA Technical Note 21: Transport of Poultry](#)

Pre-catching preparation

- **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 slaughterhouse. Shorter feed withdrawal times reduce the risk of birds experiencing prolonged hunger. A maximum feed withdrawal time of 10 hours is recommended for end-of-lay hens, because they are likely to have fewer body reserves at the end of economic production.



For conventionally reared meat chickens, it is a legal requirement that feed must not be withdrawn more than 12 hours before the expected slaughter time.

The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations, 2007. Schedule 5A, Part 2, 6 (3)

- Vehicle drivers must be trained and competent to transport birds and must be aware of their responsibility to protect bird welfare. This must include knowledge of what to do in different weather conditions (e.g. hot/cold), in an emergency or in the case of a breakdown.



There is a legal requirement for various certification when transporting poultry in connection with an economic activity. This can include:

- Certificate of competence
- Animal transport certificate
- Transporter authorisation

Guidance is provided by the UK government here:

[Transporting animals in Great Britain - GOV.UK](#)



Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations.

- The catching team must have received training in animal welfare and correct bird handling techniques. Inexperienced catchers must be allocated an experienced mentor who will closely supervise the trainee during catching of live birds.
- The catching team supervisor must advise the catching team how many birds should be loaded per container, which will be dependent on the weather that day, weight and size of birds and their physical condition. Sufficient floor space in the containers must be provided in compliance with the minimum floor areas detailed in the regulation.



Minimum floor areas for poultry transported in containers are defined in: Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Chapter VII. Space allowances, Table E: Poultry



For more information, see [HSA Technical Note 21: Transport of Poultry](#)

- The catching team must be easily contactable by staff at the slaughterhouse to ensure catching only begins (or continues) if the slaughter equipment is fully functioning and enough space is available in the slaughterhouse lairage for the number of birds being caught.
- All passageways and doorways should be cleared to allow free movement of personnel.
- Any forklifts carrying batches of poultry transport containers should have a clear route into, and out of, the poultry house. Forklifts must have fully functioning lights that enable the driver to clearly see personnel and any live birds in their path.
- Before catching begins, it is important to ensure the vehicle transporting the birds to the slaughterhouse is suitably positioned for easy unloading and loading of the poultry transport containers. In certain weather conditions, it may be advisable for passively ventilated vehicles to park alongside a series of fans that can be turned on once live birds in transport containers begin to be loaded onto the vehicle, in order to maintain the birds at a comfortable temperature.
- The transport containers must be clean, dry (particularly important in freezing weather), undamaged and suitable for the size and type of birds being caught. If using a modular drawer system, also check each module frame is in good repair and its central supports are firmly fixed (such supports prevent incorrectly mounted drawers collapsing onto the drawer below).

General catching conditions:

- Water must be available to birds right up to the time of catching, and periodically available for birds waiting to be caught, depending upon the duration of the catching operation.

- Poultry house lighting should be reduced to the lowest/safest acceptable level or blue lighting used.
- Before catching begins, the transport containers should be placed as close as possible to the group of birds being caught, to minimise carrying distances (Figure 1).

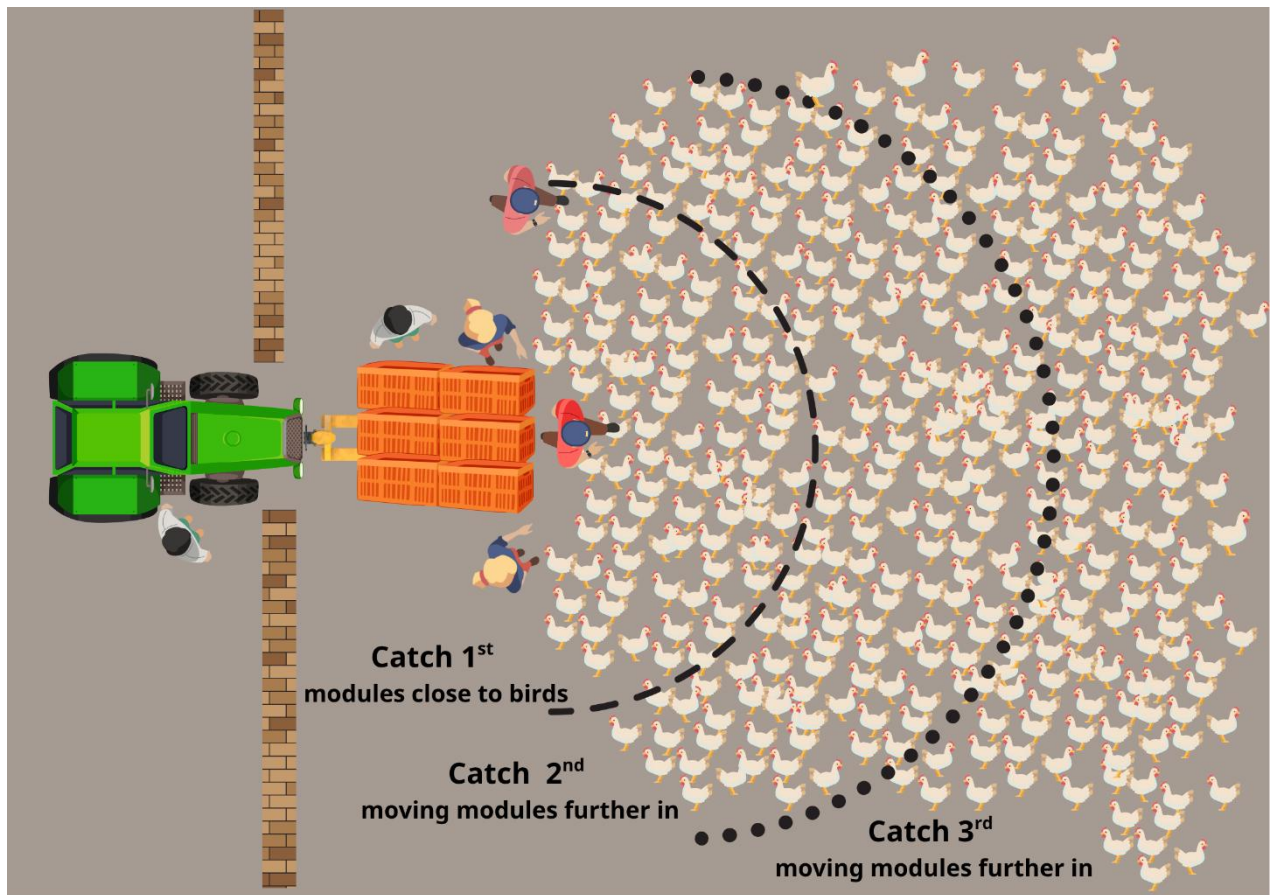


Figure 1: Diagram of dividing a broiler flock into catching zones to reduce carrying distance to modules

Fitness for transport:

- Any visibly unfit or injured birds must not be loaded into a transport container but must be immediately, humanely killed *in situ*, by a suitably trained person.
- Injured birds, or any that present physiological weakness or pathological processes, shall not be considered fit for transport and, in particular, if:
 - they are unable to move independently without pain or walk unassisted
 - they present a severe open wound, or prolapse



No animal shall be transported unless it is fit for the intended journey, and all animals shall be transported in conditions guaranteed not to cause them injury or unnecessary suffering.

Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Annex 1: Technical rules. Ch. 1. Fitness for transport

Catching principles

- Loose-housed birds can be confined using mobile catching frames to make catching easier and to avoid birds having to walk excessive distances, which may cause exhaustion, particularly in warm weather. Birds must be approached quietly and calmly, to minimise disturbance, stress and the likelihood of birds running.
- If a group of birds needs to be walked towards the catching area, operatives should walk behind the birds at a speed that allows the birds to walk at a reasonable pace, without flapping, running or falling over (waterfowl are susceptible to tripping-over due to their leg position). If a flock is not used to regular handling by humans, it is advisable for operatives to only pick up birds when necessary, i.e. when loading a bird into a transport container, when a bird needs to be culled or if a bird is slow and cannot keep pace with the rest of the group when walked at a reasonable speed. If operatives decide to pick up any birds that are slower walkers, then during carriage the operative must hold the birds as prescribed by regulation for their species and weight. Birds should not be swung or otherwise used as a lure to usher forward the rest of the group of birds. When the time comes, care should be taken to gently place the bird back down on the ground, onto its breast/feet before letting it go. This will enable a bird to quickly regain its footing, which is especially important if other birds are rapidly jostling past. Birds should not be dropped from any height because this could cause injury and panic.
- Hold birds upright as much as possible; birds do not have diaphragms so being held upside-down causes discomfort and may obstruct breathing.

Crating principles

- Avoid using containers with floor perforations large enough for birds' toes to protrude through. Crates should be in good condition, as broken crates can cause injuries and trap body parts. Crates which are damaged with breakages, gaps or sharp edges should not be used, but instead removed from the system.
- Birds should be lowered gently into transport containers and allowed to regain their balance before further birds are added. Take care to avoid hitting any part of a bird against solid objects (e.g. transport container edges), which may cause pain, risk significant and avoidable injury, and subsequently damage the meat.

- Try to limit the risk of birds escaping by temporarily closing the container opening when not in the process of loading, or by incrementally closing drawers back into the module frame as the drawer fills up. Otherwise, birds may jump out of the container, which, if it is a top-level module drawer, is quite a distance to fall and could result in injury when the bird hits the ground. If any bird escapes, it should immediately be re-caught as calmly and quietly as possible. A recent study tested add-on prototypes for transport containers, designed to reduce the likelihood of end-of-lay hens jumping out. A design was identified that resulted in fewer breast bruises. The full study can be read here: Delanglez *et al* (2025) doi: [10.1017/awf.2025.10020](https://doi.org/10.1017/awf.2025.10020)
- Take care to ensure birds do not get trapped or injured when closing container openings, i.e. when closing the doors of fixed crates or while pushing drawers into module frames. Close module drawers gently to avoid birds inside losing balance and flapping, and to reduce the severity of any trapping injuries. Sudden, high-pitch vocalisations might indicate a bird has been hurt and warrants a visual check in the drawer; any entrapments must be immediately rectified.
- Module drawers must be filled from the top drawer to the bottom (unless the manufacturer's instructions state otherwise) to avoid the possibility of injuring birds in the tray below when returning drawers to their original closed position.
- Once loaded, individual transport containers must be carried upright, to prevent birds sliding around. When putting down a container, make sure birds' toes do not get caught or crushed against the ground.

Catching and crating supervisors

- There should be two catching team supervisors, one in the poultry house to oversee catching (including to check no birds are straying into the transit path of a forklift) and another outside to oversee loading of the poultry transport containers onto the transport vehicle. The latter supervisor is responsible for checking each container to ensure no birds are inappropriately loaded and at risk of suffering during transport and lairage at the slaughterhouse. Inappropriate loading includes: birds that are upside-down on their backs in the container (particularly larger species like turkeys and geese which may find it impossible to right themselves in height-restricted containers), have obvious injuries (e.g. broken limbs), or have trapped limbs or heads protruding from the containers. This supervisor should also check that all drawers are correctly mounted within module frames, to ensure all birds have the maximum available headroom and are not at risk of a drawer collapsing on top of them. **Remember, it is a legal requirement that birds are fit for the intended journey and are transported in conditions guaranteed not to cause them injury or unnecessary suffering.**

Unloading crates

- If birds are to be unloaded from transport containers whilst alive, the container design should allow handlers to remove birds gently and easily without injury. Further information can be found at <https://www.hsa.org.uk/pre-slaughter-handling--restraint/handling-for-shackling>.

Single- or multiple-bird catching

Legislation

Catching and carrying multiple chickens by one leg has been common practice. However, under EU and UK legislation, lifting animals, including poultry, by the legs is prohibited.

Due to an amendment to the transport regulation in 2025, in Great Britain (GB, England, Wales and Scotland), only **two-legged catching** with the bird inverted is currently permitted. One-legged catching is not permitted.



It shall be **prohibited** to: (d) **lift** or drag the animals by the head, ears, horns, **legs**, tail or fleece, or handle them in such a way as to cause them unnecessary pain or suffering;



Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Ch. 3 para. 1(8) Transport practices.

EU has no amendment to allow catching (lifting) of poultry by two legs.



In the case of birds of the species *Gallus gallus* (chicken), and turkeys weighing 5kg or less, **it is prohibited to catch, lift or carry any such bird by taking hold of or holding its legs unless both of its legs are taken hold of or held at the same time.**



Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Ch. 3 para. 1(8) Transport practices. Amended in England, Wales and Scotland, 2025

Upright catching of chickens

To catch and lift chickens upright, place the palm of each hand on each side of the bird's body, over the wings (in their closed position, held against the bird's body), so the operative's thumbs lie across, and have control of, the bird's shoulders and therefore its wings (Figure 2). Care must be taken not to put excessive pressure on the abdomen with the fingers, since this may lead to respiratory obstruction or the breakage of eggs inside female birds.



Figure 2. Correct upright catching and handling of broiler chickens and laying hens

It is also possible to catch and carry two birds upright in a similar manner (Figure 3). When this method is used, it is important that the central wing of each bird is kept under control by the presence of the adjacent bird. If a central wing is caught in an awkward position or able to flap, it is at risk of breaking (Figure 4). Catchers should only use this method if they are confident they can catch and carry the birds in this manner without resulting in injury.



Figure 3. Two broiler chickens being lifted upright simultaneously, with correct wing position



Figure 4. Two broiler chickens being lifted upright simultaneously, with incorrect wing positions due to wings becoming loose

HSA recommends that adult birds should be caught, handled and supported upright and individually for the best animal welfare outcomes.

Upright handling has several welfare advantages for poultry. As birds do not have diaphragms, being held upside-down by the legs causes discomfort and may obstruct breathing. Being held upright by the body also puts less strain on the leg joints and bones, meaning the risk of leg dislocations, muscle tears and bone breakages is reduced. However, the HSA acknowledges that upright handling has not been considered practical in large-scale commercial environments where, to maximise efficiency, more than one bird is typically carried in each hand. A slower catching process can have negative consequences as birds caught earlier in the process will spend longer in transport crates, which is also stressful. Research is currently underway within the UK (2025 - 2027), in

commercial poultry facilities, to determine whether and how upright handling may become commercially feasible, and potentially a legal requirement, in the future.

Inverted leg-catching of chickens

If a person needs to carry multiple chickens at once, chickens can currently be caught and carried by both legs, in GB. This method reduces the risk of hip dislocations, leg fractures, and potential for greater discomfort associated with single-leg suspension.

Posters illustrating the catching, carrying and crating of broilers can be found on our website here: www.hsa.org.uk/publications/technical-information-posters

Specific techniques

The method of handling depends on the species of bird being caught and its housing system. Each is considered separately in the guidance below, which is for the catching and handling of large flocks being transported by crate or module to the slaughterhouse.

Chickens

Broilers (meat chickens) and loose-housed, end-of-lay hens*

*Laying hens caught from aviary systems may require a technique similar to caged end-of-lay hens (see below)

- The upright catching methods described above should be used in the first instance and/or when regulation dictates leg catching is prohibited.
- Where regulation allows, and when carrying multiple birds is necessary, birds can be caught by grasping the legs around the lower shanks (just above the feet; Figure 5). If using this method they **must be caught by both legs**, to avoid injury or suffering.
- Care should be taken to ensure a bird's shanks are held side-by-side, within the catcher's hand (Figure 5), to stop the legs crossing over in the hand and creating a pressure point, which may cause pain or discomfort to both the bird and the catcher.
- Once caught, the bird should be lifted gently, with its head hanging downward.
- If a bird starts flapping it could damage itself; gently rest its breast against the side of your thigh for a few seconds to help calm the bird.
- When carrying multiple birds, they must be held securely and comfortably to avoid distress or injury. As a guide, no more than three chickens should be carried in one hand, and no more than two broiler breeder chickens. In practice, carrying three chickens in each hand is often impractical due to hand size and grip limitations. During two-leg catching, one hand typically holds the first leg while the other guides the second leg into the same grip. This technique is difficult if both hands are already

full. Using this method, a practical maximum is four chickens at a time—three held in the primary hand and one in the secondary hand



Figure 5. Chickens being caught and carried by two legs, inverted. Shanks of the legs are not crossed. Birds are resting against the body of the person keeping the birds calmer and more comfortable.

- Chickens must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing(s), single leg or tail



It shall be **prohibited** to: (d) lift or drag the animals by the head, ears, horns, legs, tail or fleece, or handle them in such a way as to cause them unnecessary pain or suffering;



Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Ch. 3 para. 1(8) Transport practices.

Caged end-of-lay hens

- Birds should be individually removed from cages.
- The upright catching methods described above should be used in the first instance and/or when regulation prohibits leg catching.
- Where regulation allows, birds can be caught by grasping the legs around the lower shanks (just above the feet; Figure 6). In GB, **they must be caught by both legs** to comply with the regulation amendment and avoid injury or suffering. The bird's breast should be supported during removal from a cage, either by hand or a breast support slide used.

- Care should be taken to ensure a bird's shanks are held side-by-side within the catcher's hand (Figure 6), to stop the legs crossing over in the hand and causing a pressure point, which may cause pain or discomfort to both the bird and the catcher.



Figure 6. Catching caged hens individually by the legs and using a breast support slide. Holding the bird by both legs without the shanks crossing.

- Once removed from the cage, a bird may be directly placed into a transport container or handed to a second person to transfer it to the container. Where possible, it is preferable to avoid passing birds. Ideally, birds should be removed from the cage using the upright catching method, supporting the breast and holding around the wings. However, if multiple hens need to be carried to the containers simultaneously, the handler should hold them securely and comfortably by **both legs**, without causing the birds distress or injury. As a guide, no more than three hens should be carried in one hand.
- If a bird starts flapping it could damage itself; gently rest its breast against the side of your thigh for a few seconds to help calm the bird.
- Hens must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing(s), single leg or tail

Turkeys

- Turkey poults up to 2kg can be caught and carried in the same manner as broiler chickens (see above).
- The upright catching methods described above, and illustrated in Figure 7 for turkeys, should be used in the first instance or when regulation prohibits leg catching.



Figure 7. Upright catching of growing turkeys

- Where upright catching is not possible, and regulation allows, growing turkeys (2- 5kg liveweight) can be caught by **both legs**: gently lower the bird onto its breast and lift, hold the turkey against the body and place an arm over the wing(s) to prevent flapping. **If leg catching, they must be caught by both legs** to comply with the GB legislation and avoid injury or suffering. For turkeys of this size, no more than one bird should be carried in each hand.
- **Turkeys over 5kg must be caught and carried upright or allowed to walk into containers (herded)**. They can be lifted by gently grasping the shoulder of the wing furthest away from you, while your free hand gently grips the legs or wraps around the wings and body (Figure 8). For large turkeys it may not be possible to hold both legs, in which case the closest leg can be held. The turkey should then be lifted and held close to the body to support the weight and reduce potential flapping or struggling.



In the case of **turkeys weighing more than 5kg** it is **prohibited** to lift or carry any such bird in an inverted position, whether by holding the bird by the legs or otherwise.



Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Ch. 3 para. 1(8) Transport practices. Amended in England, Wales and Scotland, 2025



Figure 8. Correct techniques for catching and handling turkeys over 5kg. A) Restrain the bird gently by the legs and wing with the breast supported on the floor. B) Lift the bird close to the body, using a knee if required to support the weight. C & D) Options for hold the bird around the body enclosing the wings whilst maintaining control of the legs.

- Once caught, the bird should be loaded into the container headfirst, taking care to ensure the keel of the bird does not impact with the front edge of the container. Any impact may result in breast bruising, which is painful to the bird and likely to cause downgrading at the slaughterhouse.
- Turkeys must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing, single leg or tail.

Other poultry species

As described above, Council Regulations (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations was amended in England, Wales and Scotland in 2025, to permit two-legged catching of chickens and turkeys up to 5kg. However, this amendment does not include other poultry species. **Therefore, catching ducks, geese, quail and guinea fowl by the legs is illegal.** It is also prohibited to lift or drag animals by the head or tail or handle them in such a way as to cause them unnecessary pain or suffering.



In the case of birds of the species *Gallus gallus* (chicken), and turkeys weighing 5kg or less, **it is prohibited to catch, lift or carry any such bird by taking hold of or holding its legs unless both of its legs are taken hold of or held at the same time.**



Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Ch. 3 para. 1(8) Transport practices. Amended in England, Wales and Scotland, 2025

Ducks

- Ducks should ideally be handled by **placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings, and lifting the bird** as per the upright catching method described for chickens (above and Figure 9).
- In a commercial environment, ducks are typically herded closer to the containers then lifted by the neck for loading. **Ducks must not be carried** any distance by the neck **and must only be placed straight into the transport container. If ducks are being carried, the breast of the bird must be supported.** Alternatively, they can be held with a hand on each side of the body over the wings. When lifting a duck by the neck, care must be taken to lift it by the base of the neck for minimal time, to ensure its head/neck is not twisted, and its windpipe is not squeezed or otherwise obstructed (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Catching a duck by the neck for loading into a container. Catching and carrying a duck using the upright method with hands securing the wings and supporting the body

- No more than two ducks should be lifted in each hand, and the necks of the two ducks must be separated by the finger(s) of the operative.

- Larger ducks (e.g. over 4kg) should be caught and carried individually with the breast of the bird fully supported at all times.
- Ducks can easily become lame so should never be caught and carried by the legs.
- Ducks must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, wing, legs or tail. Inappropriate catching and handling can easily lead to ducks becoming lame, which is why they should **never** be carried by the leg(s).

Geese

- Geese can be initially restrained by gently holding the neck and they tend to sit down once restrained. Do not lift geese only by the neck. Geese should be handled by placing one arm around the wing and breast and lifting the bird towards your own body, for support, whilst the other hand carefully holds onto the neck (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Initially catching a goose by holding the neck. Lifting and carrying a goose supporting the body with the arm wrapped over the wing and around the underside of the body/breast.

- Adult geese may also be caught and lifted by both shoulder joints, with a finger in between, to separate each shoulder. Ideally the breast should be fully supported simultaneously.
- Crossing and interlocking the wings of geese as a means of restraint to prevent flapping is **not** an acceptable, humane practice.

Guinea fowl and quail

- Guinea fowl and quail must be lifted by placing one hand on each side of the body, over the wings with the legs hanging free as per the upright method described for chickens (above and Figure 11).



Figure 11. Carrying guinea fowl and quail using the upright method

- **Catching and carrying guinea fowl or quail by the legs for transport is illegal, even if they are caught by both legs.** For quail, catching by the legs has a high risk of bone breakage.
- Guinea fowl and quail must **never** be lifted or carried by the head, neck, wing(s), leg(s) or tail.
- Guinea fowl and quail are very flighty, so the openings to transport containers need to be an appropriate size and carefully controlled to stop birds flying back out of the container.

DISCLAIMER OF LIABILITY

In no circumstances can the HSA accept any liability for the way in which systems and this information are used, or for any loss, damage, death or injury caused thereby, since this depends on circumstances wholly outside the HSA's control.

Further Reading

HSA Online Guides: www.hsa.org.uk/publications/online-guides

- [Electrical Waterbath Stunning of Poultry](#)
- [HSA Technical Note 21: Transport of Poultry](#)

Defra Guidance:

- Transporting animals in Great Britain
www.gov.uk/guidance/transporting-animals-in-great-britain
- White meat slaughterhouses: unloading, handling, holding, restraining, stunning and killing
www.gov.uk/guidance/white-meat-slaughterhouses-unloading-handling-and-holding-restraining-stunning-killing#waterbath-stunning-for-poultry
- Poultry: on-farm welfare (Codes of recommendations and guidance for laying hens, meat chickens, ducks, turkeys and other birds bred on farms)
www.gov.uk/government/publications/poultry-on-farm-welfare

Relevant Legislation:

- Regulation (EC) 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations
www.legislation.gov.uk/eur/2005/1
- Regulation (EC) 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing
www.legislation.gov.uk/eur/2009/1099
- The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015*
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/1782
- The Welfare of Animals (Transport) (England) Order 2006*
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2006/3260/contents
- The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007*
www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2007/2078

* Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have their own variations of this regulation