



PPA SPECIALIST BRAND OF THE YEAR 2021

# How poultry farmer minimised floor eggs to 0.5% at peak lay

Debbie James 07 October 2021



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One Worcestershire free-range egg business has reduced the incidence of floor eggs at peak production to just 0.5%.

The Watts family run three 16,000-bird houses near Worcester, and have a set policy for preventing floor eggs.

When a new flock arrives, up to 10% of eggs can be laid on the floor so the work begins to reduce that number as quickly as possible.

See also: [How to convert from colony to barn eggs and hit retail specs](#)

Alex Watts, who farms with his father David and brother Chris, warns that the problem must be solved before the pullets are 40 weeks old. Leaving it beyond that time means the flock will continue to lay floor eggs right through the cycle.

"If you haven't ironed out all the issues by then you can't change their behaviour," he says.

## Farm facts

- Lohmann birds
- Three-tiered Big Dutchman 264 system sheds
- Nest boxes on each tier
- 60-acre range
- Eggs sold to Stonegate

Patrolling the sheds at the start of lay is vital. The team at Norton Farm does this every 30-60 minutes from when the lights come on at 6.45am until 11am for several days, although this varies according to the time of the year.

“We keep doing these walks until we are happy with the system and the floor egg numbers, it takes several weeks,” says Mr Watts.

Floor eggs are collected promptly to ensure other birds do not pick up the habit. “If a chicken sees an egg, it will lay by it,” says Mr Watts.

As time progresses the shed-walking intervals are lengthened until there are no floor eggs and patrols are no longer needed.

Time put in at the beginning will save up to two hours a day as the cycle progresses, Mr Watts estimates.

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Birds are fed 15 minutes after they wake so that they do not move too far from their nest boxes.

Feeding the flock during the peak laying period is avoided because the noise can unsettle the birds, which would then leave the nesting area at the most critical time.

The farm’s lighting system is operated down to dusk, with the lights coming on gradually over a half-hour period in the morning.

Feeding time takes place within 30 minutes of the dawn period, with feed placed in front of the nest boxes to discourage birds from wandering away.

Rope lights are hung in the shed to eliminate shadows and there are two sets of roof lights above the scratching area.

“In our old system we had nest lights but by keeping that area dark we have found it helps to reduce floor eggs,” Mr Watts says.

Plastic curtain flaps attached to the nest boxes also help to keep them dark and draught-free.

To encourage pullets to investigate the nests, the boxes are closed when they first arrive and opened more widely as the birds approach sexual maturity.

The business buys its pullets from Humphrey Feeds and Pullets, which grows pullets to 16 weeks on a similar system.

“During that rearing process the feed and water is offered at different heights to get the pullets used to moving up and down before they arrive with us,” says Mr Watts.

That process encourages the birds to move up to the nest boxes, so decreasing the likelihood of them getting into a habit of laying eggs on the floor.

## 5 expert tips for reducing floor eggs

Nearly every producer will have a floor egg problem to some degree, so the challenge is to minimise it.

James Wilson, regional poultry specialist with Humphrey Feeds and Pullets, says it becomes a serious situation when floor egg problems persist beyond the period of pullets settling into the shed.

“It can really affect profit; quite often the eggs are not saleable or not graded as first class,” he says.

Mr Wilson gives advice on how to prevent this common problem.

### 1. Consider the breed

Some breeds are more prone to floor laying than others.

The more docile the breed the more likely it is as they will come towards you when eggs are being collected from the floor, promoting this behaviour further.

Breed reps will be as keen to avoid the issue as the farmer and should give an indication of how to breed around it.

### 2. Walk the sheds often

The single best tactic is to walk the sheds often when the birds are young, collecting the eggs before the birds see them and think that the floor is where they must lay.

If a bird wakes up on the floor they will lay on the floor. Work with your pullet supplier to ensure birds are trained to roost in the system or on the deck.

Visit the pullets in their rearing shed to see its design, whether it looks right for prompting roosting behaviour.

Even when pullets are trained you will still need to spend two or three weeks after they arrive encouraging some of them to jump up at night.

### 3. Make nesting boxes appealing

An ideal nesting box is one that is dark, warm and draught-free, consider this in the shed design at the very beginning.

Nest boxes should open well before lights come on in the morning.

### 4. Improve lighting

Birds are drawn to lay in shaded areas, so lots of lights in multiple places are needed to prevent shadows.

The timing of when lights come on in the morning is important – if you come to the shed at 7am when the lights are coming on and notice there are already a lot of floor eggs the lights should be set to come on earlier.

When a flock comes into lay in the summer, floor eggs are more of a problem because the shed floor can be warm.

Ventilation can be used to prevent this by keeping the house airy.

## 5. Feeding

Avoid feeding too much before hens have laid in the morning as they will all be drawn from their nesting boxes to the feeders.

Feed as soon as they wake up and then do not feed between 8am – or earlier depending on the lighting – and 11am.

Feed again after the majority of the eggs have been laid; when that is will depend on how the lights are set to come on.