



## THE CAUSES OF SMOTHERING AND HOW TO REDUCE IT

**The discovery of a smother is upsetting as well as financially detrimental for egg producers. While every possible step can be taken to try to prevent smothering incidents, they still can occur without an obvious explanation.**

The potential causes are numerous, and include: a predator close to the house, or a low flying aircraft. The ingress of a shaft of light into the house on a sunny day can stimulate birds to congregate and peck at the flecks of dust illuminated in the beam. This then leads to a frenzy of birds jostling for the same patch of sun, resulting in overcrowding and then potentially, a smother. However, by the time the smothered birds are discovered the sun has moved and the shaft of light has disappeared, leaving no apparent cause.

Why hens can be susceptible to smothering incidents is not fully understood, but it seems largely to be a behavioural trait. Sometimes birds simply find a favourite place in their house, maybe a warm spot, so they congregate there, piling on top of one other until those underneath suffocate.

When young birds are just coming into lay, they compete for nest box space during peak laying times during the day, and this can be a problematic time for smothering. Ensuring





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clear access to nesting boxes and closer supervision by staff during the danger periods can reduce such incidents.

### **A matter of breeding?**

James Wilson is a poultry specialist, part of the network of advisors who support and advise customers of Humphrey Feeds and Pullets across the UK. James covers central Wales and the Welsh borders.

"All egg producers will have experienced smothers at some time," said James, "Sometimes you can lose a few birds which is annoying but at other times you can lose 50 which is really worrying."

James believes the tendency of birds to smother is a behavioural trait that may be

linked to genetics. Geneticists have been working to eliminate the trait by selective breeding and James believes that progress is slowly being made, but it is a complex, multi-factorial characteristic.

"In my opinion smothering was a lot more common when I started in poultry 10 years ago," he said. "Though any smothering incident is one too many."

### **A smothering case study**

Andrew Cardy has been a Humphrey Feeds and Pullets customer since he entered the free range egg industry seven years ago. He now keeps 5,000 birds at his farm in Berkshire.

Shortly after he began in poultry, Andrew experienced a seemingly random case of





smothering. He had ordered a delivery of road planings from nearby road surface repairs to use on his farm.

“These guys pulled up beside the sheds late at night and tipped out all the planings which made a hell of a noise,” recalled Andrew. “When the lorry pulled off, the back door slammed shut; it was like ten shotguns going off in the middle of the night.

“I thought no more of it but when I next went into one of the sheds I found around 30 to 40 smothered birds. The noise in the night must have disturbed the birds and they crowded into a corner. Unfortunately the first ones in often don’t make it out again”.

Since then, Andrew has been very wary of delivery vehicle noises at any time of the day that could spook his birds.

However, Andrew has noticed that he has not seen a general smother incident on his farm for more than four years. He puts this down to some simple precautions, such as boarding off corners in his sheds, but also to the nature of his Lohmann Brown hens.

“Lohmann Browns seem calm, stress free and easy

to manage,” he said. “I can go into their shed and they don’t all fly up like some other breeds have done for me before.”

“Chickens are funny creatures though,” he added. “You can have a pneumatic drill working nearby and it won’t affect them in any shape or form but then you can have something you can hardly see, like a sparrow getting into the shed and it will create panic. That’s why we have to make sure we have mesh over all the side ventilation to stop wild birds from getting in.”

#### **Preventing smothering**

James offers the following advice to his customers to help reduce the risk of smothering:

- Block off areas where birds tend to congregate
- Be extra vigilant during peak laying times
- Remove birds from overcrowded nest boxes
- Erect effective measures to keep out predators and wild birds
- Control light ingress
- Make only subtle and gradual changes

to routines

- As a last resort electric fencing can be the only option to prevent reoccurrence in areas of particularly high risk

While it will always be difficult to predict when and why a smother incident happens, work by the industry to breed more resilient and less stressed birds, combined with an increased awareness of the problem among farmers, seems to be working to drive down the trend in this sad and costly occurrence.