

Chapter 1. Introduction

Raising baby chicks can be a delightful experience if things go well, but it can be discouraging and even heartbreaking if things go wrong. The purpose of this book is to help you avoid the pitfalls and achieve the delightful experience that makes poultrykeeping attractive in the first place.

When baby chicks are brooded artificially—that is, when they are raised without their mothers—they depend on you for food, water, warmth, and protection. How well these are provided in the first few weeks of life will determine both their short-term survival and their long-term development.

When my wife Karen brought home our first group of twenty-five baby chicks, we had read in a book that chicks could be started out in a box heated with a sixty-watt light bulb. Nowhere did this book mention that this was adequate only if you brooded the chicks in a room heated to 70 °F! Our chicks were in a basement that maintained a steady 50-55 °F. The chicks weren't warm enough until we had escalated all the way to a 250-watt heat lamp. Fortunately, the chicks did very well in spite of our inexperience, giving us some much-needed but largely misplaced confidence.

A lot of our chick-rearing experiences were like this. We'd try to follow the best instructions available, only to find that these instructions were only a general outline, with important details missing. The result was that sometimes all our chicks would do well and sometimes they wouldn't.

At about the time we were becoming resigned to this, we met a woman who had retired from the egg business after raising 30,000 chicks per year for many years.

She told us proudly that she would lose about 1% of the new chicks during the first week, but that every chick that survived the first week would still be alive and healthy when they were moved into the laying house when they were five months old.

How was this possible? Our own results couldn't hold a candle to this. She explained that it was largely a matter of reducing things to a system. If something works, try to do it the same way next time. If something seems troublesome, try to find a better way, and always stay on the lookout for new ideas. She attended poultry science classes at the nearby campus of Oregon State University from time to time, and stayed in touch with the Poultry Specialists at the Extension Service

Her brooder houses and equipment weren't fancy at all. She used overhead infrared heat lamps to provide brooder heat, which is what most hobbyists and small flockowners use. In other words, this was not a question of fancy equipment, but of knowledge and skill.

I was impressed by what I heard, and rethought my own chick-brooding techniques. I went to the University library and read everything I could find, old and new, on brooding technique.

The results have been encouraging. For one thing, my reading dispelled the notion that I was a victim of a tall tale. While 1% mortality is good by anybody's standards, the mainstream egg industry considers 2% mortality to be achievable and 5% mortality to be pretty bad. On the other hand, many small flockowners would be happy if they could hold their average losses to 10%, and a great many people have given up on poultrykeeping altogether because they were discouraged at their inability to keep their chicks alive.

I also discovered that the methods that lead to success with baby chicks are neither difficult nor expensive. They used to be widely publicized, but the books describing them are no longer in print, so they have become the Lost Secrets of the Poultry Masters.

There was a golden age of poultrykeeping, running from roughly from 1900 to 1950. This was a period when most eggs and poultry still came from small commercial flocks on family farms, with an average flock size of under 100 hens through most of the period. It was also the early period of poultry science, when researchers at the Experiment Stations tried out every technique they could think of, to see which ones worked. With millions of

farms raising chicks every year, there was a lot of business for equipment manufacturers, and competition was intense. There was a greater selection of books and equipment on the market during that period than at any time before or since.

With the decline of the family farm, whole categories of knowledge and equipment have vanished. You used to be able to buy insulated chick brooders for cold-weather brooding with either propane or electric heat. Now you can't buy insulated brooders at all. This is one reason why small-flock chick rearing is harder than it used to be.

Success with brooding depends on believing that it can be done. Once I believed it, I started looking with a keener eye at my setup and methods, and this was as important as any specific techniques.

Like a lot of people who have gotten serious about being successful with chicks, I have reached a point where I can get a typical batch of chicks through the brooding period without losses after the first few days, and even this first-week mortality is a lot lower than it used to be. The hatchery we use adds extra chicks to cover losses in shipping, and the extras frequently exceed the losses both in shipping and in brooding. As often as not, I discover that my batch of 75 chicks has 76 survivors at the end of the brooding period! Things don't work this well every time, but the progress since I started out has been tremendous.

The impact of these results is not easy to exaggerate. I used to dread brooding chicks because the results were so erratic. It's very discouraging when baby chicks didn't do well. Now that the results are consistently good (barring the occasional misfortune), I can brood chicks with enthusiasm.

My goal in this book is to set down both the general principles and the little details that can help you be succeed in brooding poultry, and to set down as many different techniques as I can, to make your chick-rearing as successful and as enjoyable as possible.