

Tips for Small Flock Owners on the Handling of Market Turkeys and Chickens for Harvest

Handling and transporting poultry that will be going to market is easy process as long as the flock owner follows a few guidelines.

Be certain to feed your market birds the appropriate feeds during the growth to ensure they are properly finished and healthy. Clean water should be available at all times. If you have to medicate birds, use only approved medications and follow the instructions on the package with a careful eye on any withdrawal period before marketing.

Withdraw feed approximately 12 hours before shipping, this will reduce stress on birds during handling and there will be less in the digestive tract during processing. Do not remove water during this period.

When it is time to catch the birds, use a movable partition to confine them to a small area so you will not have to chase them in order to catch them, this will reduce the stress to the birds and the person catching them. The birds can be crowded into an area where they are tight but not so tight that they pile up. The birds can then be loaded into crates, pet carriers or boxes; this should be done as quickly as possible to prevent any additional stress on the birds. Since birds are usually calmer in the dark, try to catch them in a room, where you can dim the lights, or perhaps load them up at night.

When catching birds, a few techniques are useful in preventing injury to the bird or yourself. Always catch market poultry by both legs, preferably at the shanks. NEVER grab a bird by one leg as this will often make them struggle, possibly injuring their leg. As soon as possible get both legs in one hand, this will further reduce flapping. If both legs are held firmly in one hand and the other hand is used to cover the wings, the bird is less likely to struggle. Do not let birds hang upside down for long, as this can put undue stress on them. Turkeys require some extra consideration because of their size. It is best to back up to the crowded up birds. Reach between your legs and grab both shanks (near the hocks) of the bird you want to catch. In a quick motion pull the legs out from under the bird and stand up at the same time. If properly done, the bird will be hanging upside down with the wings spread but tight against the backs of your legs. Birds thus held will usually not flap, if they do just snug them up against your legs a bit more. Put both shanks in one hand as you hold the turkey this way, then step free of one wing and grab the base of that wing, so you are holding most of the weight of the bird with than hand holding the legs and controlling any struggling by holding one wing. The turkey can be carried this way to the crate. When you put the bird into the crate, try to control flapping until the bird is all the way in the crate and has been released. Crates or boxes should allow for plenty of ventilation; birds should be close to each other in the crates to reduce flapping but not so crowded as to induce panting. Protect your birds from excessive wind during transit, especially in the winter. Removal of birds from crates in another time to watch for injury to both the birds and the handlers. Again, be sure to secure both legs and try to control one wing while removing them.

The possibility of injury to the handler, although small, can be reduced further by wearing long sleeved shirts, long pants, gloves and eye protection.

Taken from John Anderson, Dept. of Animal Science, OSU/OARDC