

The Organic Development Programme: run by Organic Centre Wales delivering on behalf of Farming Connect



Maximising feed from the range: Encouraging your birds to range

Access to a well-managed range is an essential part of organic poultry production. The birds use it for food, shelter and self-medication and a recent study suggests that up to 70% of their requirements for lysine and methionine and 25% of their calcium can come from the range. But in order to maximise these benefits it is important that the birds range widely and frequently. This not only increases the volume and variety of food they pick up, but also reduces poaching and nitrogen build up. This factsheet highlights some the things you can do to encourage ranging in your flock.

Vegetation and shelter

Getting the right balance of different plant species on the range is vital. The ideal range has a combination of tree, hedge and herbaceous species which fulfil a number of different functions as described in Table 1. Chickens feel very vulnerable out in the open, so help them feel more secure by providing suitable shelters such as wigwams made out of logs or even an old trailer.

Breeds

Some breeds naturally range more than others. Older breeds such as Ixworth or Light Sussex and slower growing breeds, such as Master Gris, are much more active on the range compared to Ross-type birds. The former not only forage more actively, they also react faster to the threat of predation and therefore survive better.

Feeding

Poultry are very good at regulating their own diets and only eat what they need. If you provide all the protein as purchased feed, they are much less inclined to go looking for it out on the range. Reducing the protein in the ration will get the birds out of the house.

Flock Size

A DEFRA study has shown that the larger the flock the less birds range. This is related to the pecking order, a hierarchical system of social organisation within the flock. This system starts to break down above flock sizes of about 200, and ranging becomes more restricted the larger the flock becomes. In flocks of greater than 1500 only 5% range. In flocks of 500 birds, this proportion is about 40%, and in a 100-200 bird flock, virtually all birds range.



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The causal link between the pecking order and ranging is still not well understood. It is thought that 'knowing its place' contributes to the bird's sense of security, which in turn gives them the 'confidence' to go out on the range.

Rearing

The sooner the chicks get access to pasture, the more they will range when they reach adulthood. This can be as early as from one week old in the summer, but you need to provide a secure environment protected from crows, buzzards and other predators. However this is not possible in the many systems where chicks are not brooded on the range. If this is the case you can bring the range to the birds to some extent by bringing in a few sods of turf every day, which gets them used to the sight and feel of the world outside.

Summary

To maximise ranging within your flock you could:

- Establish a wide variety of plant species providing food, shelter, medication and community interest.
- Provide additional shelter on the range to make your birds feel more secure. Natural materials e.g. log piles are best, but a trailer, for instance, will do the job.
- Choose breeds which naturally range more.
- Reduce the amount of purchased feed you provide – make your birds go and out look balance of their required nutrients.
- Keep the flock sizes as small as possible.
- Give the chicks access to the range as early as possible.

References and further information

Organic Centre Wales has produced a technical guide on organic table bird production. You can request a copy from OCW or down load it from our website:

http://www.organiccentrewales.org.uk/uploads/poultry_guide_english.pdf

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Table 1. Some plant species beneficial to the range and their functions (from: Silvo-poultry: An agroforestry system for organic chicken production at Sheepdrove Organic Farm. Lois Philipps, Organic Research Centre, 2002)

Trees	Species	% of Mix	Purpose
	Ash	18	Timber
	Beech	12	Timber and beech mast
	Field maple	12	Shelter
	Alder	12	Shelter
	Hornbeam	10	Timber
	Cherry	6	Food and community interest
	Wild pear	10	Food and community interest
	White beam	10	Shelter
	Apple	5	Food and community interest
	Scots pine	5	Shelter

Herbs	Species	Density	Purpose
	Quinoa	Medium	Nutritional
	Kale	Medium	Nutritional
	Plantains	High	Anti-inflammatory
	Wild garlic	High	Antibacterial, Landscape
	Comfrey	Low	Anti-inflammatory
	Aromatics e.g. thyme	High	Antiseptic, calming de-wormer
	Vetches	Medium	Vulnerary, N fixation
	Marigolds	Medium	Anti-inflammatory
	Wild strawberries	Medium	Vitamin C, community interest
	Fennel/dill	Medium	Calmative
	Mullein	Medium	Expectorant
	Wormwood	Low	Anthelmintic

Hedge plants	Species	% of Mix	Purpose
	Quickthorn	30	Shelter
	Field maple	20	Shelter
	Blackthorn	1	Shelter
	Pea shrub	10	Shelter and protein
	Hazel	5	Food and Community interest
	Dogwood	5	Food
	Spindle	5	Food
	Holly	2	Food and Community interest
	Vib opulus	2	Shelter
	Vib lantana	2	Shelter
	Wild plum		Food and community interest
	Crab apple		Food and community interest
	Dog rose	4	Food and community interest
	Elder	10	Food and community interest
	Blackberry		Food and community interest
	Raspberry		Food and community interest