A PLAIN FLOCK ALMANAC

Go Check on Your Birds

Keeping a small flock healthy, laying, and paying its way on one acre.



RAY HOLLIS
MISSOURI OZARKS

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by Ray Hollis



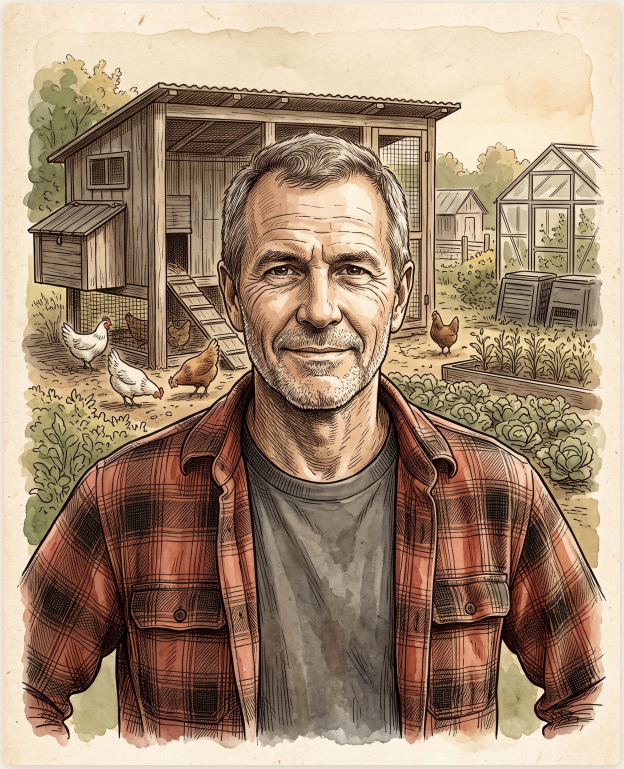
Ray Hollis is a narrated character. His stories are written to show how the methods work and are not reports of real events. The methods in this book are drawn from traditional poultry practice, university extension publications, the Merck Veterinary Manual and current public-health guidance.

Prices are typical United States retail prices in 2026 and will differ where you live. Where a fact decides whether something is safe — eggs, meat, parasite products, antibiotics, bird flu, heat lamps — this book gives the current published guidance and says where it came from. Sources are listed in Appendix E. Check them against the newest edition before you rely on them, and follow the label on any product.

This book does not replace a veterinarian. See “What this book is not.”

First edition · MMXXVI

Meet Ray



I’ve kept chickens for forty-one years, since about 1985, and most of what I know I learned by getting it wrong first.

We feed the family off one acre in the Missouri Ozarks: June, me, a garden, and about thirty hens in a 12 × 26 run. My grandfather kept twelve hens, a cow and a creek-bottom place, in a hen house with a dirt floor he put up in 1931. He never wrote anything down. He just went out at dusk and looked.

I built my first coop tight as a drum in 1988, and the birds told me about it every morning. I built one without a cleanout door in 1996 and paid for that with my back. I brought mites home on a swap-meet hen in 1998. Our daughter named a Buff Orpington “Pancake” in 1994, and I still think about Patsy, who sat forty-one days on nothing. Those mistakes are in here, because they’re the reason the methods are.

If you’ve watched the channel, this is the long version, with the numbers worked out on paper and a few things I said stronger on camera than I should have, set right.

— Ray

The Promise

One page, no more.

Your hens have been telling you what's wrong. Nobody showed you where to look.

A hen hides trouble as long as she can. It's how a bird stays alive in a yard full of things that eat birds. But she can't hide all of it. She's the last one off the roost. Her comb is a shade paler than it was on Sunday. She sits in the corner of the run when the others are scratching. The floor stings your nose at knee height, and it hasn't started bothering you at standing height yet. All of that is there to see, a few days before you'd call it a problem, if you know the hour and the place.

Most folks who get into trouble with chickens don't get there for lack of caring. They care a great deal. They buy the medicated this and the herbal that, they scrub the coop every Saturday, and they lie awake over a hen that was fine on Tuesday. What they're missing is the order of things. They treat the bird when it's the building. They buy feed when it's the waterer. They dust the hen when the mites are in the crack behind the roost.

So here is what this book promises you. Not that you'll never lose a bird. You will. Not free eggs, either, because there is no such thing, and I'll show you the arithmetic. It promises that you'll know what to look at, what it means, what to do first, and when a thing is past you and it's time to call somebody. And it promises the numbers, so that you can decide for yourself what a flock is worth to you.

It takes about two minutes at dusk to start. Go do that, and then come back and read the rest.

— *Ray*

How to Read This Book

Straight through before the chicks come, or by the symptom when something's wrong.

There are two ways in, and both are right.

STRAIGHT THROUGH

The book runs the way a flock gets built. Part I teaches you to see: the walk, and how many birds you ought to have in the first place. Part II is the place, because most bird problems start as building problems. Part III is water and feed, where the money goes. Part IV is eggs. Part V is trouble, in the order you're likely to meet it. Part VI turns all of it into a year you can run without thinking too hard.

BY THE SYMPTOM

Or something is wrong tonight and you've got the book open on the feed bin. Go to the Trouble Finder a few pages on. Find what you're seeing, and it'll send you to the section. Every section is numbered, so "13.5" is always the mite cycle and "4.2" is always the smell test. You don't need to have read Chapter 3 to use Chapter 13.

THE FOUR KINDS OF PAGE

- *Methods* — how a thing is done. What you need, how it's done, the tonight check, and what to do when it goes wrong.
- *Numbers* — what a thing costs, weighs, holds or eats, worked out on paper so you can work it out again for your own flock.
- *Stories* — a hen, a season, a mistake. These are the reason the methods exist.
- *Cards* — one page at the end of every chapter, the whole chapter boiled down to what you check off. Cut them out and tack them up. All twenty are gathered again in Appendix B.

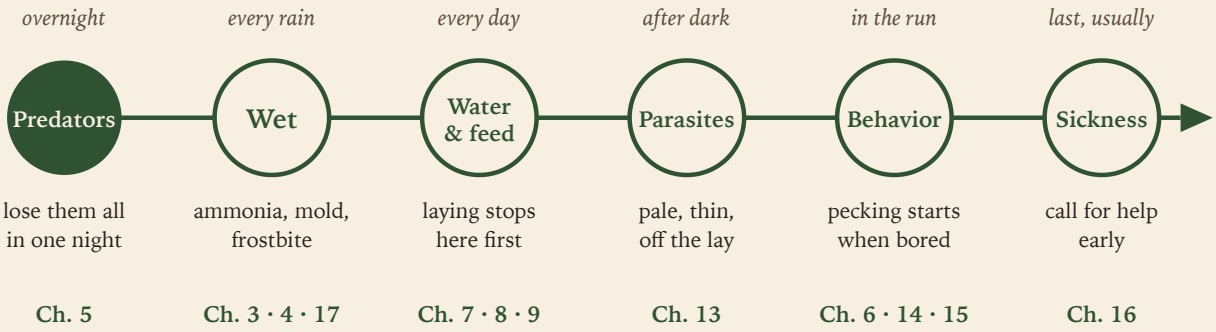
THE TONIGHT CHECK

Nearly every method ends with one. It's the smallest thing you can do, usually with a flashlight or your own nose, to find out whether this section is your problem or somebody else's. Do the check before you buy anything. Most of the money I've wasted on chickens, I wasted by skipping it.

The Order of Trouble

Most of this book sits somewhere on this one line.

Flock problems have an order to them. The thing you see is usually at the far end of the line, and the thing that caused it is further back. Start at the left. Don't go looking for a sickness in a flock that's standing in a wet coop with a dry waterer.



Check from the left. The walk (Ch. 1) is how you see all of it. Eggs (Ch. 10–12) tell you when something on the line has gone wrong.

The order of trouble. Start at the left, even when the symptom is at the right.

Predators come first because nothing else on the line can cost you the whole flock between supper and breakfast.

Wet is second because a damp building makes more of the problems further down: ammonia, mold, frostbite, sour litter.

Water and feed are third. A hen can't make an egg out of a waterer that froze at noon, and most of what you'll ever spend on a flock goes here.

Parasites are fourth, and they do their work after you've gone in for the night.

Behavior is fifth. A flock that's been crowded, bored, or shuffled will take it out on its weakest bird.

Sickness is last on the line, which doesn't mean least. A sudden death or several sick birds can't wait for you to walk the line. Go straight to 1.6 and Chapter 16, and make the call.

Dry, fed, safe and busy. Most of the rest takes care of itself.

The Trouble Finder

Find what you're seeing. Go where it sends you.

What you're seeing	Look first at	Then
Several birds dead or sick at once, purple combs, swollen heads	**Report it today**	16.8
A hen that isn't right and you can't say why	The hands-on check, 1.4	1.6, 16.2
Birds missing or killed, door still shut	Reading the scene, 5.2	5.3–5.7
The coop stings your nose	The smell test, 4.2	3.4, 4.6
Wet or caked litter	Finding wet spots, 4.6	3.2, 7.2
No eggs, or fewer eggs	The checking order, 10.2	7.1, 10.3–10.6
Eggs disappearing, wet shell in the nest	How egg eating starts, 11.2	11.3, 11.4, 10.5
Soft, thin or odd eggs	Thin shells and odd eggs, 11.5	8.6
Dirty eggs	Dirty eggs, 11.6	12.1
Hen straining, walking like a penguin	Signs of egg binding, 11.7	16.9
Hen won't leave the nest, hot and cross	The four signs, 15.2	15.3, 15.4
Something crawling on your arm at dusk	The flashlight check, 13.3	13.5, 13.6
Crusty lumps around the vent, dirty feathers below it	Telling them apart, 13.2	13.5
Rough, lifted scales on the legs	Scaly leg, 13.8	
Bare patches of feathers	Mites, lice, or molt, 13.2	10.4, 14.3
Feathers everywhere in the fall, no eggs	The molt, 10.4	
Blood on a hen, or hens picking at one bird	Stopping it, 14.4	6.2, 16.4
Bare, packed run with bored birds	The deep-mulch run, 6.3	6.4–6.7
Rat holes, droppings or chewed feed bags	Rats in the run, 6.8	5.7, 8.5
Sparrows in the rafters	Sparrows and mites, 13.9	8.5
Limping, or a swollen foot with a dark scab	Bumblefoot, 16.5	16.9
A full, squishy or hard crop in the morning	Crop problems, 16.6	16.9

What you're seeing	Look first at	Then
Sneezing, rattling, swollen eyes	Breathing problems, 16.7	16.2, 16.9
Odd droppings	Reading droppings, 1.5	15.8, 16.9
Black tips on the comb in winter	Frostbite, 17.3	3.4
Panting, wings held away from the body	Heat stress, 17.6	7.1
Feed bill climbing	Feeders that stop the waste, 8.4	8.8, Ch. 9
A chick with a stuck, pasted vent, or chicks crowded or scattered	The brooder, 15.5	15.7
A hen who's done laying, or too many roosters	Keep, rehome, or cull, 18.2	14.6

What This Book Is Not

Said early, so it never becomes a problem later.

It is not a veterinarian. Chapter 16 tells you what to look for, how to separate a bird, and who to call. It doesn't give you drug doses, and it doesn't have you doing surgery on the kitchen table. Nobody can diagnose your hen from a book, and that includes me.

It does not promise free eggs or free feed. A mulberry tree can take a real bite out of your feed bill for part of a year. It can't feed a flock forever by itself, and neither can anything else on your acre. When you see a big promise like that, on my channel or anybody's, do the arithmetic. I've laid it out for you in Chapters 8 and 9.

It is not a breed encyclopedia or a gear catalogue. There are good books that list every breed of chicken there is. This one gives you enough to choose, and then it moves on. There are prices, because a method you can't afford isn't a method. Nobody paid to be in here.

It does not pretend the old ways were always right. They weren't. My grandfather painted his roosts with kerosene next to a lit lantern, and he got away with it. Lamps have burned down a good many coops. Where the old way was wrong, this book says so and gives you the safer way right beside it. Keep what still works. Drop what doesn't.

It doesn't know your county. Rules on keeping birds, selling eggs, and processing meat change at the county line. Where the law matters, I'll tell you to go and check.

PART I

The Walk

Learn to see the flock before you change anything.



CHAPTER 1

The Dusk Walk

It is not sudden. Most flock trouble shows days early, to anyone looking at the right hour.



My grandfather called it walking them to bed. He'd go out at last light with no bucket in his hand, shut the door behind the last hen, and stand there a minute. I thought he was resting. He was counting. This chapter is what he was doing in that minute, and what to look at in the morning and with your hands. It costs nothing but the habit, and it comes first in the book because it's how you'll find out which of the other nineteen chapters you need.

1.1 The hen that was fine on Tuesday

A wet spring on the home place, some years back.

I found Dottie on a Friday morning, under the roost, already cold. She was a Barred Rock, four years old, the kind of hen who'd stand on your boot to see what you were up to. I carried her out to the garden fence and I said what everybody says. She was fine on Tuesday.

June had come out behind me with the egg basket. She looked at the hen a good while, and then she asked me when I'd last had my hands on her.

Well, I had to think about that. I fed every morning. I'd been in and out of that coop twenty times that week, fixing a hinge, topping off the waterer, carrying shavings. I could have told you how many eggs we'd gathered. I could not have told you the last time I'd picked up that bird.

So I sat down on the bucket and went back through the week the way you'd go back through a bank statement. Monday she'd been last out the pop door. I remembered that because I'd had to wait on her to shut it behind me. Tuesday she was in the corner of the run under the plum, by herself, and I'd thought, she's found the shade, in a week with no sun in it. Wednesday night she wasn't up on her end of the top roost, where she'd slept for three years. She was down low by the wall. I saw that. I saw it and walked on, because I had a hinge on my mind.

That's three days of a hen telling me something, in the only language she had. None of those things looked like sickness. A hen doesn't cough and lie down like somebody in a movie. Every bird that ever lived has come from a long line of birds who didn't look weak in front of a hawk, so she'll stand up and act right until she can't. What you get is small: a place in line, a spot on the roost, a little less going on.

I don't know that I could have saved her. Some of them you can't, and a four-year-old hen on a wet spring doesn't owe you anything. But I'd have had three days to separate her and make a phone call, instead of a shovel on Friday.

I started counting the next night. I've missed some nights since, but not many. I don't say she was fine on Tuesday anymore. I say I wasn't looking.

1.2 The dusk count: who's on the roost, and where

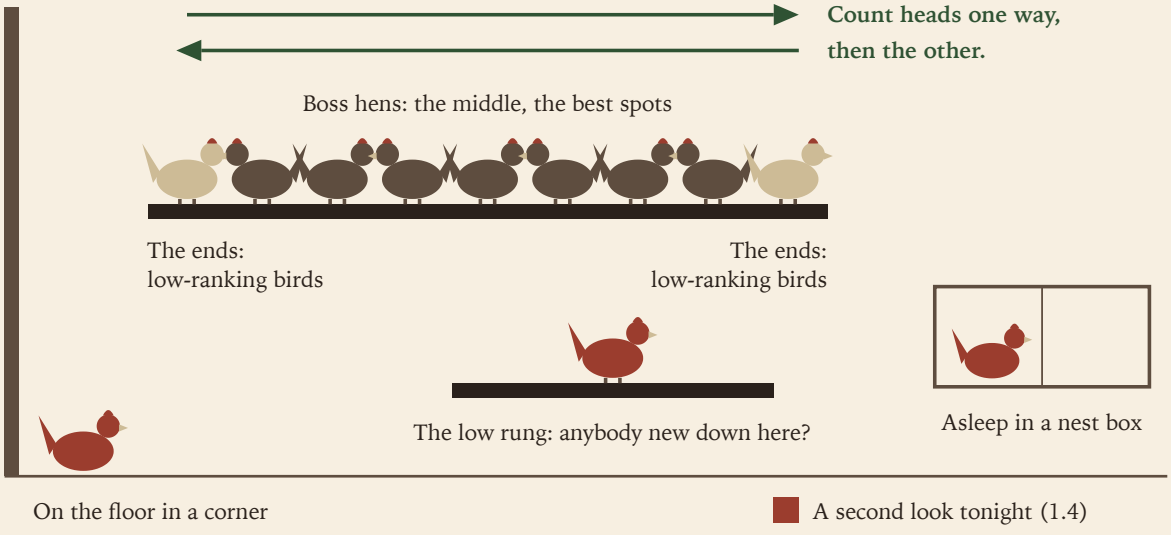
Hens go to bed in order, and they go to the same place. That makes the roost the best chart you'll ever keep, and it fills itself in every night.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Last light, or the quarter hour before you'd shut the door anyway
- A small flashlight, held low and pointed at the floor unless you need it
- The number of birds you ought to have, in your head

HOW IT'S DONE

1. Go out when most of them have gone in, and stop at the door. Don't rush them. A flock that's been hurried into the coop won't show you its regular order.
2. *Count.* Count heads down the roost, then count again from the other end. If the numbers don't match, a bird's behind a bird. If you're short, go look before it's full dark. Check under the coop, in the brush along the fence, and in the nest boxes.
3. *Look at where each one is.* Over a couple of weeks you'll learn your flock's seating chart. The boss hens take the best spots. Low-ranking birds get the ends, and the low rung if your roost has one. Note anybody who's moved down from where she belongs.
4. *Look at who's not on the roost.* A hen on the floor in a corner, or settled into a nest box for the night when she has never slept there, is worth a second look. A young bird who hasn't learned to roost is one thing. An old hen who's quit is another.
5. *Listen.* A settled flock makes small sleepy noises. Stand still for thirty seconds. Rattling, wheezing, or a repeated sneeze is what you're listening for, and you can hear it at night when you'd never hear it over a day's racket (16.7).
6. *Smell at knee height* before you close up (4.2), then shut the door and latch it. Check the latch with your hand. That's the walk.



The roost is a seating chart that fills itself in every night. Learn who sits where, then watch for the bird who has moved.

THE TONIGHT CHECK

Go do it. Count your birds and write down one thing: who's in the worst spot, the low rung or the end nearest the door. Do the same tomorrow night. If it's the same bird both nights,

that's her place. If somebody new has dropped down there, pick her up before you go in (1.4). You'll need about two minutes, and you can do most of it with your hands in your pockets.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *Can't tell the hens apart:* you don't need to know them all. Learn the three or four who stand out, and learn their spots. Leg bands in a few colors cost a couple of dollars if you've got a whole flock of one breed.
- *Pullets sleeping in the nest boxes:* that's a habit, and a messy one. Lift them onto the roost after dark for a few nights (3.5, 3.6).
- *You come home after dark:* count by flashlight, then. The bird that's down in the corner will still be down in the corner. Keep the beam low so you don't rouse the lot of them.
- *One short and you can't find her:* shut up the rest first, because whatever got her may be coming back. Then go look with a light, and read the scene in the morning (5.2).

1.3 The morning look: who comes out last

The dusk count tells you who's in trouble on the roost. The morning tells you who's in trouble on her feet. Open the door and stay there for two minutes, with the feed still in your hand if you can stand to make them wait.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Two minutes before you do anything else
- The pop door or big door, opened from where you can see the whole yard



HOW IT'S DONE

1. *Watch the order.* Healthy hens come out of a door like they're late for something. Note the last two. It'll usually be the same two, because somebody has to be last. What you care about is a new name at the end of that line, or a bird who stays inside.
2. *Look at how she walks.* Limping, a wide-legged stance, a low tail, or a walk like a penguin all mean something, and the walk is the first place egg trouble and foot trouble show up (11.7, 16.5).
3. *Look at the head end.* Combs should be full and red on hens in lay. Eyes bright and open all the way. Pale, shrunken or purple is different, and you want to catch it (1.6).

4. *Look at the floor under the roost.* It's the night's droppings in a row, sorted by who sat there (1.5).
5. *Look at the waterer and feeder.* Is the water down about what it should be? Is the feed? If nobody's eating and nobody's drinking, that's the whole flock telling you something (7.1).
6. *Feed them, and watch who comes to it.* Every bird in the flock should be at the feed within a minute or so. Any bird who stands back while the rest eat is your bird for the day.

THE TONIGHT CHECK

Tonight, set your feed bucket by the door so you'll remember in the morning. Open the coop before you pick it up. Stand still, and count how long till the last hen's out. You're learning what normal looks like on your place, because it's the only way you'll ever see what isn't.

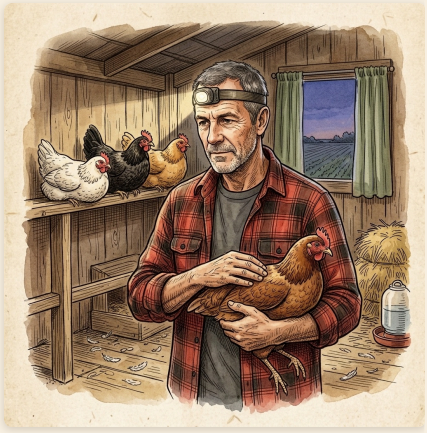
TROUBLES FIXED

- *A hen stays on the nest in the morning:* she may be laying, and she may be broody. Check again in an hour. If she's still there, hot and cross, go to 15.2.
- *The whole flock is slow on a hot or bitter morning:* weather does that. Look for the one that's slower than the rest.
- *You leave for work in the dark:* do the morning look on Saturday and Sunday, and let the dusk count carry the week.

1.4 The hands-on check: keel, crop, comb, vent, feet

A hen can fool your eyes. Feathers hide a lot. She can't fool your hands, and the best time to use them is after dark, when she's on the roost and calm as a sack of feed.

WHAT YOU NEED



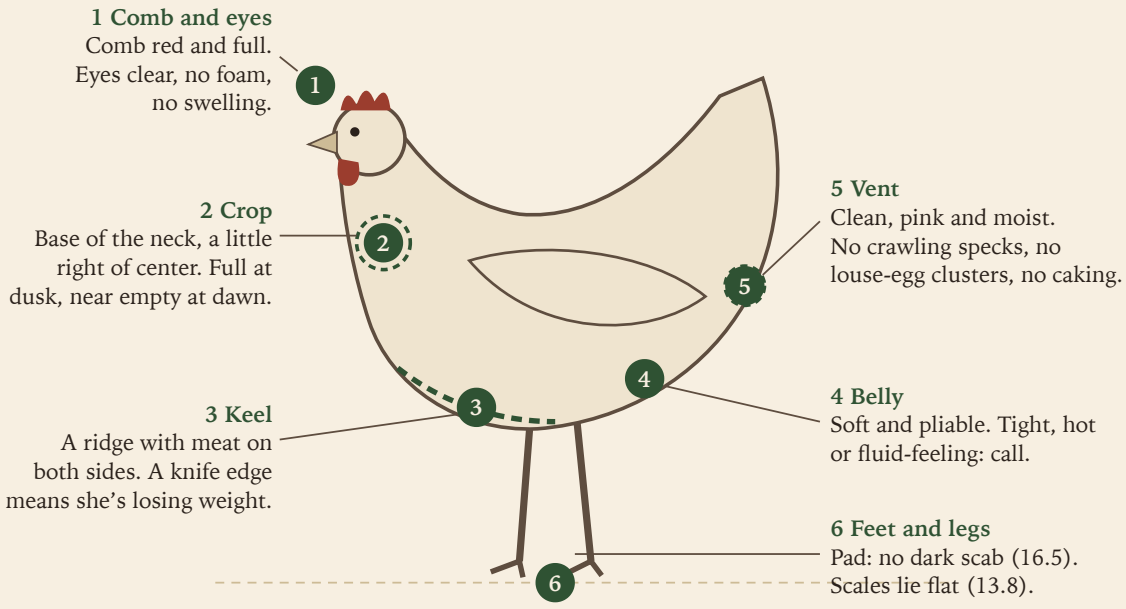
- Dusk or full dark, and a small light. A headlamp leaves both hands free.
- Three or four birds a week, in rotation, so that you get through the flock every month or so, plus any bird the walk has flagged
- Soap and water for afterward (12.6)

HOW IT'S DONE

Lift her off the roost with both hands around the wings, and tuck her under one arm with her head behind your elbow. Then go from front to back:

1. *Comb and eyes.* A laying hen's comb is red and full. Pale means something's drawing on her, whether that's the molt, a pause in laying, or blood-feeding parasites (13.3). Bluish or purple is the serious one (1.6). Eyes should be clean and clear, with no foam or swelling, and nostrils clean.
2. *Crop.* It sits at the base of the neck, a little right of center. At dusk it should be full and give like a beanbag. At first light, before feed, it should be near empty. A crop that's hard "like a golf ball" before the morning feed, or squishy and sour-smelling, needs 16.6.
3. *Keel.* Run your fingers down the breastbone. In good flesh, you'll feel the ridge with meat on both sides. If it stands up like the edge of a knife, she's been losing weight. This is the most useful ten seconds in the book, because feathers can hide a starving hen for weeks.
4. *Belly.* Soft and pliable is usual. A tight, hot, or fluid-feeling belly is worth a call.
5. *Vent.* Lift her tail and part the feathers with your light. It should be clean and pink and moist on a layer. Look for crawling specks and dirty, blackened feathers at the vent base (13.2), lumpy clusters of louse eggs, or caked droppings.
6. *Feet and legs.* Turn each foot over. A dark scab on the pad with swelling around it is bumblefoot (16.5). Rough scales that lift away from the leg are scaly leg (13.8).
7. Set her back on the roost where you found her. Wash your hands when you're through.

After dark, hen tucked under one arm, head behind your elbow. Front to back:



Six stops, front to back. The keel is the one feathers hide best.

THE TONIGHT CHECK

Do your heaviest-looking hen and your smallest tonight. Feel both keels and compare them. It's how your hands learn the difference, and you'll be surprised which of the two is really the thin one.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *She flaps and fusses:* you're doing it too early, or holding her too loosely. Wait for real dark and pin the wings gently. She'll settle in a few seconds.
- *You find a thin bird and nothing else:* separate her at feed time and see whether she eats. A bird at the bottom of the order may just be getting pushed off the feeder (8.4, 14.2). If she's got a chance to eat alone and doesn't, go to 16.2.
- *You find mites on one bird:* you've got them on more than one. Go to 13.3.

> **MIND THIS.** Healthy-looking birds can carry *Salmonella* and other germs. CDC says wash with soap and water right after you handle birds, eggs or equipment, leave the coop shoes outside, and don't let children under 5 touch poultry. A bird with sudden sickness or dead birds in the flock is a different matter: stop here and read 16.8 before you pick anybody up.

1.5 Reading droppings: normal, cecal, and worrying

I know this isn't what you got chickens for. But you've got a daily report from every bird in the flock, laid out in a row under the roost, and it's free.

WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING AT

What you see	What it usually is	What to do
Firm gray-brown curl with a white cap	Normal. The white is urates, which is how a bird passes what a mammal would pass as urine.	Nothing.
Soft, shiny, dark, smelly mustard to chocolate blob, a few times a day	Normal cecal dropping. The ceca empty a couple of times a day, and they smell terrible.	Nothing. This is the one that scares new keepers most, and it means the least.
Loose and watery, whole flock, hot day	Hens drink more in heat and pass more water.	Keep the water coming and watch them (17.6).
Odd color after a treat	Mulberries turn things purple. Greens and scraps change color too.	Think about what they ate yesterday.
Bloody, especially in chicks and young birds, with hunched and droopy birds	Merck's manual lists bloody diarrhea and malaise as signs of coccidiosis, most often at 1–4 months old.	Today. Separate and call (15.8, 16.9).
Greenish-white diarrhea, with other signs of a sick bird or sudden deaths	Has many possible causes, and is also on Merck's list for avian influenza.	Read 16.8 now.
One bird's droppings are loose and off, for days, and she's losing keel	Could be worms, could be a dozen things.	Separate her, get a fecal test (13.10, 16.9).

HOW TO LOOK

1. Look first thing in the morning, before the hens have scratched it all up. A droppings board makes this very easy (4.5).
2. Look for what's changed. One odd dropping means nothing. A hen can pass a strange one for no reason you'll ever know. Several in a row, from the same spot on the roost, three mornings running, is worth attention.
3. Match it to a bird. If it's under the place where she sleeps (1.2), you've got your suspect. Do the hands-on check that night.

THE TONIGHT CHECK

Tomorrow morning, before you do anything else, look at the row under the roost and find one of each: a curl with a white cap, and a cecal. If you've got both, you've got what a normal morning looks like. Learn those two, and you'll have a real baseline.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *You can't see anything in the bedding:* slide a feed sack or an old board under one stretch of roost for a night. Pull it in the morning and you've got a clean reading.
- *You're sure it's worms because you read it on the internet:* you can't tell by looking. A fecal test tells you, and your vet or state lab can say what it costs (13.10).

Disease signs here are from the Merck Veterinary Manual's backyard poultry chapters. Droppings point you toward a question. They don't answer it, and they can't replace a vet or a lab.

1.6 Six signs that can't wait until morning

Most of what the walk finds can wait until you've read a chapter over coffee. These six can't. If you see one of them, you do something today, and in some cases what you do is pick up the phone.

THE SIX

WHAT YOU SEE	WHY IT CAN'T WAIT	WHAT YOU DO
1. Sudden deaths, or several sick at once	Could be bird flu or another fast-moving disease, and it could reach you and your neighbors.	Don't move birds. Call your state veterinarian or USDA at **1-866-536-7593**. Read 16.8.
2. Purple or swollen head, comb, wattles or legs	On USDA's and Merck's lists of avian influenza signs.	The same call. Read 16.8.
3. Gasping, open-mouth breathing in cool weather, rattling	A bird in respiratory trouble may have something that spreads. Panting at 90°F is another matter (17.6).	Separate her (16.2) and call a vet. If it's more than one bird, treat it as #1.
4. Blood on a bird, with others pecking at it	Hens go for red. A small wound can turn into a killing inside a day.	Get her out now (14.4, 16.4).
5. Penguin stance, straining, no egg	Merck says that egg binding ranges up to life-threatening, and to see a vet as soon as possible.	Go to 11.7 and call.
6. A bird down, can't stand, or paralyzed	Could be injury, poison, or disease such as Marek's. She can't get to food or water, and the others will go for her.	Separate her with water in reach and call (16.2, 16.9). If she's suffering beyond help, 16.11.

HOW TO USE THE LIST

1. Tape it inside the coop door. It's on the card at the end of this chapter.

2. Find your numbers now, before you need them: your state veterinarian's office, a vet who sees poultry (16.9), and the USDA line. Write them on the card. It's a bad night to start looking.
3. Don't carry a sick bird anywhere, or take her to a neighbor's, or to a swap, until somebody who knows has told you to.

THE TONIGHT CHECK

Look up your state veterinarian's phone number. Write it on a piece of tape and stick it inside the coop door. If you take one thing from this chapter, take that. I hope you never dial it.

TROUBLES FIXED

- *You can't find a vet who'll see a chicken:* plenty of folks can't. Your state diagnostic lab and extension office can often point you to someone (16.9).
- *You don't want to bother anybody over a chicken:* the state vet and USDA want that call. Merck says to call when you're losing birds fast, and USDA says it can test birds free of charge.

Signs and reporting line: USDA APHIS, Defend the Flock, and the Merck Veterinary Manual, "Common Infectious Diseases in Backyard Poultry" and "Common Management-Related Problems in Backyard Poultry."

1.7 The ten-minute flock: what a week of chores really takes

Folks will tell you that chickens are no work, and folks will tell you they run your life. Here's what it takes on paper, for twelve hens in a coop that's been set up right.

THE NUMBERS

Job	How often	Minutes a week
Open up, the morning look, feed and water	5 min a day	35
Gather eggs twice	2 min each, twice a day	28
The dusk walk and lock up	3 min a day	21
Scrub the waterer, top up shell and grit	Once a week	15
Rake the run, stir the litter, add bedding	Once a week	20
Hands-on check of three or four birds	Once a week	10
The monthly coop inspection (20.2)	30 min a month	7
A regular week		**136**

HOW TO FIGURE IT

Daily jobs: 35 + 28 + 21 = 84 minutes a week ÷ 7 = 12 minutes a day.

A week: 136 minutes ≈ 2¼ hours.

A year: 136 × 52 = 7,072 minutes ≈ 118 hours.

Per dozen, at 180 dozen a year (Ch. 19): 118 hours ÷ 180 ≈ 39 minutes.

WHAT THE NUMBER LEAVES OUT

These are my reckonings from my own place, and yours will differ. They leave out the big days: building the coop, a once-a-year litter harvest (4.7), raising chicks (Ch. 15), butchering (Ch. 18). They leave out a sick hen, and the night the raccoon comes. They leave out standing there watching the hens for no reason at all, which I've never been able to get down under twenty minutes. And they don't count finding somebody to do it when you go away (20.4). A flock is every single day, Christmas included. Thirty-nine minutes a dozen is cheap only if you like the work.

CUT OUT AND TACK UP INSIDE THE COOP DOOR

1.8 The walk card

AT DUSK — TWO MINUTES

- ☐ Count heads, both directions.
- ☐ Who's moved down? Who's on the floor?
- ☐ Stand still 30 seconds. Listen for rattling.
- ☐ Smell at knee height.
- ☐ Shut the door. Test the latch with your hand.

IN THE MORNING — BEFORE THE FEED

- ☐ Who's out last? Is it a new name?
- ☐ Anybody limping or walking like a penguin?
- ☐ Combs red? Eyes bright?
- ☐ Look at the row of droppings under the roost.
- ☐ Water down? Feed down?
- ☐ Who stands back from the feed?

HANDS-ON — THREE OR FOUR BIRDS A WEEK, AFTER DARK

- ☐ Comb → crop → keel → belly → vent → feet.
- ☐ Wash your hands after.

CAN'T WAIT — DO SOMETHING TODAY

- ☐ Sudden deaths or several sick · purple or swollen head: don't move birds. Call.
- ☐ Gasping or rattling · blood · penguin stance · bird down: separate her and call.
- ☐ USDA 1-866-536-7593
- ☐ State vet _____
- ☐ Poultry vet _____

I don't say she was fine on Tuesday. I say I wasn't looking. — Go Check on Your Birds · Ray Hollis

There’s More Where This Came From

This was the walk. The book is what to do about what it finds.

This chapter came out of *Go Check on Your Birds* — twenty chapters, from the coop that stays dry and the run that keeps hens busy to the feed math, the mite cycle, the bird that stops laying and the bird that gets sick. Every method laid out plain, every number worked on paper, and a card at the end of every chapter to tack up inside the coop door.

Go check on your birds. — Ray