

Hen Health - Red Mites (*Dermanyssus gallinae*)

One of the biggest problems we seem to have, and from the number of calls we receive, we are not alone. These are very tiny (the size of a dot) mites which live in the hen house, squeezed between the tiniest cracks in the wood. They come out at dusk, march along the perch and climb the hens leg where they feed on their blood. Then they go back to their hiding place until they feed again a few days later.

So it is important to remember that these DO NOT LIVE ON THE BIRD, so not easy to tell if your hens are being attacked. An increase in feed consumption accompanied by lower egg production is a sign that poultry houses should be examined for mites.

Signs and symptoms include some or all of the following;

- Feather loss
- Loss of colour in comb and/or face
- Lethargy
- Weight loss
- Stopped laying eggs or reduced laying
- Hens don't want to go in their house at night
- In large numbers you may find them crawling over hen eggs
- Death

From Spring the numbers of red mites increase and their numbers peak in August, then reduce through Autumn. Red mite numbers are usually low during the Winter. Because of the rate that these mites breed, a house can quickly become over run with them. In such great numbers they can easily cause death in hens due to anaemia. The red mite varies in colour from grey through to dark red - depending on how much blood it has consumed! One complete red mite life cycle can be completed in just 7 days. The females lay their eggs in the hen house just 24 hours after their first drink of blood. These eggs hatch in just 3 days in the warmer weather and these become adults in just 4 day! You can see how quickly they multiply...

Note that Broody hens are very susceptible to being killed by red mites, as they stay in the one place for so long. Always put a broody hen in a freshly cleansed house and add lots of diatomaceous earth powder to bedding.

When checking houses for mites, look out for a tell-tale grey ash (like cigarette ash) around cracks & crevices as this is evidence of mite poo. You can check your perches and houses at dusk with a torch to try and spot them, but they are very small. You can find that simply touching or leaning against a hen house of an evening can result in lots of the red mites crawling along your arm. Luckily they will not live on humans, so a quick shower will wash them away!

The red mites can live up to 8 months without feeding on a hen, so be careful with second hand houses – treat them before use. Also be careful with used bedding which can contain mites, we have had red mites crawl over us from the compost heap 3 months after we last put bedding on there...

Treatments

Treatments vary, but it is the house you are treating more so than the hen.

Creosote House

Regular creosoting of the house —inside and out is helpful as kills red mites and offers protection against them. Mix creosote 50% with diesel 50% or paraffin 50%. Best to use a pump action sprayer, but flush it out with warm soapy water as soon as you have finished. Red mites also like to hide under the ends of perches.

Roofing

Do not use felt on hen house roofs, as red mite love to live under felt and are difficult to kill there, even with creosote. Instead use Onduline sheeting, it is inexpensive.

Dusting

You can dust your hens in diatomaceous earth powder of an evening and sprinkle some in their next boxes too. Put the powder under the ends of perches.

Garlic

Remember giving hens garlic helps ward off red mites, one clove per hen for a week liquidized and added to their feed.