How I Get MFC Helmets to be Better Parents

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In an earlier article I discussed why I think we need to get our MFC's to be better feeders. This article will reflect on some techniques that I use to promote the process.

I use the following strategies:

Feed Pots: I often find that the male helmets start to slack off in the feeding department when the pair is about to lay their next set of eggs. At that point I put a small dish of food into the nest box with the babies. The parents (being lazy) will eat from the feed pots in the nest. The babies will see them and quickly learn to eat on their own. This allows them to still take food from the father while finishing off their meal with grain.

Places to Hide: After the babies leave the nest they are often more fragile than some other breeds. I create a place for them to hide on the floor. Typically this is under the nest boxes where other birds can't get above them and pick them. I place another feed pot in their hiding place so they can eat without the others bothering them. I usually watch them closely as some will need their beaks dipped in the water to learn to drink.

Augmenting: It is very important for the parents to try to feed the babies. There are some who are just not good at it. This is when I hand feed. Rather than taking the babies in the house, I let them with the parents and come back to top them off after the parents have tried to feed them. I usually go back to the loft an hour or so after feeding. I pick up each baby and check it's crop. If the crop is not full I will give it some exact hand feeding mix. I have found pairs that learn to feed better as time goes on. Sometimes you don't have to keep hand feeding the babies the whole way. By letting the babies with the parents, I feel that they all learn to be better parents.

Breeding: I try not to breed birds that are bad parents. Sometimes this is hard to do. There is always a stellar bird that just wont raise a baby. Well folks, sometimes you have to make the hard call and say that the long term goal of perpetuating the breed is more important than that one valuable bird. If a bird tries to raise and is bad at it, I will cut it some slack and hope it learns to do better. However, I have found that some birds who won't raise at all can pass that trait on to their babies.

Record Keeping: In my record system I track how many nests each bird has successfully raised. I also track what breed raised that individual. By keeping good records I can make better selections with regard to parenting. It is also useful to note which birds are feeding well or poorly. The hens feed the babies for the first 10 days or so. Then the cocks feed them the rest of the way. If you see a baby growing well until it starts feathering out, you can assume that the hen is a good feeder. If the baby starts to get light at 2-3 weeks, you can assume that the cock is not a very good feeder. The opposites are also true.

Old to Young: When putting young birds in the breeding pen the first time I usually try to pair them with an older and more experienced bird. This helps them learn the nature of the breeding game.

Breed Later: Waiting until March to pair the birds is often helpful. Obviously your local weather conditions will help determine the best time in your area. However, the fact remains that helmets are simply not strong / robust enough to breed in harsh weather. It is a great temptation to try to get them together early in hopes of getting a few from that early round. Experience has shown that breeding early only leads to disappointment. (but I do find it so hard to wait!)

Swapping: Swapping eggs is often helpful in the first round. After I get the birds going early in spring there can be weather fluctuations that are tough on the babies. I will often swap the feeder and helmet eggs for the first round. This allows the feeders to raise up the helmets while allowing the helmets to get going with the stronger and more robust feeder babies. By having something to raise in the first round, the helmets are usually more prepared when the next round comes with their own young.

Other factors: Sometimes you have to look past the breeding and look at other factors affecting your breeding program. Weather fluctuations, overcrowding, disease, mixed breeds in a pen, and beak length (the standard says MFC should have 5/8” beak … many are shorter) are all factors that will effect parenting. Be sure you understand everything that is going on in your loft and with your birds before you decide that some are bad parents.

I have been using the above techniques for the last few years. I am definitely seeing results in the birds. I firmly believe that you can let helmets raise their babies and still be competitive at the shows.