



VET'S VIEW
With **Marcella Perversi**



Marcella Perversi is a University of Turin graduate and senior small animal vet with a passion for birds, particularly chickens. She is also a qualified veterinary acupuncturist and has a keen interest in wildlife conservation. She is a trustee of the British Hen Welfare Trust.



It is easy to create a simple dust bath by using a large cat litter tray

Keeping hens in tip top condition

Chickens are easy to keep, but they do sometimes fall victim to infestations. Small animal vet **Marcella Perversi** explains what to do when red mite or lice make a beeline for the henhouse

ONE OF the joys of hen-keeping is to watch them doing what comes naturally. You might have noticed that your hens spend a good part of their day preening and dust bathing, but do you know why they do this?

This daily ritual is their way of keeping bugs at bay and to ensure that their feathers stay in a healthy condition. That little fleshy nub at the root of the tail, called the uropygial gland, but more commonly known as the preen gland, secretes a thick, transparent oil which the act of preening distributes to help keep feathers glossy.

As well as keeping feathers in good condition, preening helps chickens to shed dead skin and dander and pick off any lice or mites. Excessive preening could be a sign that your bird has visitors.

RED MITE AND LICE

Poultry's main pest, which will be all too familiar to hen-keepers, is red mite.

Red mite are tiny - on average 0.6-1mm in size. If you find one in your hen coop before it has had its meal of blood, it will be grey, and you could easily be fooled into thinking that a cluster of them is a pile of dust.

It is at dusk that the mites will show their true colour - literally. Just like tiny vampires, they climb onto any nearby hen and feed on her blood. On a positive note, red mites don't live permanently on birds. They just crawl onto them at night for a meal.



Include diatomaceous earth powder in any dust bath

A warning sign that you may have a heavy infestation, which can cause anaemia and debilitation, is that your hens may be reluctant to enter their coop at night.

Lice are another matter. Although it isn't common for a healthy bird to have a large burden of lice, they are more prevalent in birds that are unwell, less active and not preening.

Unlike red mite, lice spend their entire lifecycle on the chicken, where they eat dead skin and feed on blood. Lice live for around a month and in that time a female louse can lay between 50-300 eggs.

TREATMENT FOR PESTS

The good news is that there are products available from vets that can safely treat a flock and their housing for red mite.

Routinely checking birds for parasites, for instance by systematically parting the feathers to expose the skin, is also a good habit to get into.

Adult lice are visible to the naked eye, but they move fast and will scatter when exposed to light. It is easier to spot cement-like clusters of lice eggs attached to the base of feathers.

An effective and simple way to ensure that your chickens remain pest-free is to create a dust bath for them. Given the opportunity, chickens will instinctively dig holes in dry soil and make their own, but in wet conditions this isn't always possible.



Red mite will be grey until they have fed on a hen, at which point their colour changes to blood red

You can create a simple dust bath by using a large cat litter tray, or a child's rigid paddling pool. It should ideally be sited under cover, or provided with a lid. A good mixture of dry soil or sand, wood ash and diatomaceous earth powder will allow your hens to self-medicate while they perform their daily ablutions.

CREATE A FLOCK HEALTH PLAN

A flock health plan can help chicken-keepers to spot any problems before they get a chance to escalate, ensuring that birds stay in good condition.

The plan should include routine worming, ideally four times a year using a licensed product which can be purchased as a pre-medicated feed or added to the hens' existing feed.

For keepers who prefer not to do this, at the very least they

should collect a faecal sample four times a year to check for the presence of worms.

Keeping the ground around the hen house well drained will help to prevent the ground becoming poached or waterlogged.

Diatomaceous earth powder is a chemical-free and natural product that should form a part of your routine. It can be sprinkled in nest boxes, dust baths and even directly on to chickens to minimise the risk of external parasites getting a foothold.

Finally, apple cider vinegar, which should be diluted and only ever given in a non-metal container, is a great all-round tonic which is said to help boost the immune system. It is packed full of vitamins, minerals and trace elements, and is a natural antiseptic. Used in moderation, it is a good addition to any flock health plan. ■