

Free-Ranging Your Family Flock



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Raising and keeping your own small flock of poultry has grown in popularity over the last few years. These small backyard flocks are often allowed out of the chicken run to free-range around the property.

Free-ranging is believed to improve chicken welfare as it provides the opportunity

to move freely outdoors, increases exposure to sunlight, and provides greater opportunities for natural behaviors. Although there are many benefits to free-ranging chickens, it is also important to be aware of some of the challenges faced when doing this.

Nutrition

One challenge owners can have is decreased nutrient consumption and/or an imbalance of nutrients. When chickens are free-ranging, eating bugs and plants will take up a portion of their daily diet intake. This decreases the amount of feed they will consume, potentially leading to nutrient deficiencies. For free-range laying hens, problems with eggshell quality can be a common issue seen. Many owners will free-choice oyster shells to help correct this. Some other ways to help address nutrient deficiency challenges are to look at your feeding program.

The first solution is to offer a high quality complete feed for your flock. The Crystal Creek® complete poultry feed, Family Flock®, is formulated using only highly digestible protein sources. It contains fortified levels for key nutrients that are set high based on the most recent industry recommendations. Family Flock® is formulated using a combination of proteinate and polysaccharide-chelated trace minerals. Crystal Creek® also uses selenium yeast as the sole selenium source. Research shows that both these trace mineral sources, and selenium yeast are over 90% bioavailable, whereas other sources are far less available for absorption by the chicken. Family Flock® also contains an enzyme pack that works to improve the digestibility of minerals and amino acids. A quality feed like Family Flock® paired with free choice oyster shells will help deliver ideal nutrition with increased absorption that supports optimum health and production for free range flocks.

To help encourage the feed intake of Family Flock® by free-range chickens, owners should always have full feeders and 4 inches of feeder space per standard-sized chicken. This is most important during the most common feeding times for chickens. Chickens eat throughout the day but they all will eat as soon as they rise in the morning due to their crops being empty. Owners should either plan to get up early to fill feeders or fill feeders the night before. This will guarantee chickens have plenty of feed available in the morning. Also, leaving chickens locked in the coop or run at the beginning of the day will help ensure they fill up on their feed before going out to free-range.

Predator Protection

A major concern to consider when allowing chickens to free-range is the exposure to predators. It is much more difficult to protect chickens from outside threats when they are allowed to freely move about. Some recommendations for predator protection include:

- 1) Limit free-range activities to supervised times only.
- 2) Provide shelter that birds can easily access when in open areas.

Unfortunately, chickens are on the menu for many different predators. They can be attacked from both the sky and ground, day, and night. Common predators for poultry are hawks, foxes, raccoons, possums, coyotes, and even domestic dogs and cats. Owners can try to protect their flock by letting birds out only when they are home. This helps to ensure someone is available to stop/prevent attacks should they occur. Trees, shrubbery, or other forms of shelter around the yard can help prevent aerial attacks. It is also important to have a predator-proof, secure coop that the chickens can be locked up in at night.

Disease Control

Allowing chickens to free-range increases the risk of exposure to pathogens, both viral and bacterial. Two examples of viral diseases are Egg Drop Syndrome and Avian Influenza (Bird Flu). These diseases can be brought in from direct contact with wild waterfowl that naturally spread them worldwide, or even by human visitors that walk on the property with infected fecal matter on their footwear. Bacterial diseases include E. coli and Salmonella, which can cause health issues within a flock as well as posing a food safety risk.



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Crystal Creek® has protocols and tools owners can implement to help protect their flock from exposure and infection. Protocols include limiting access to areas where wild birds might congregate and asking human visitors to not handle chickens and stay out of the common chicken areas. Implementing an effective cleaning and disinfecting protocol using a safe, effective, and non-corrosive agent, such as chlorine dioxide will also decrease pathogen exposure. Crystal Creek® HabiStat™, a chlorine dioxide disinfectant, comes in two easy-to-use forms: a ready-to-use tablet and a liquid activator/base set. Mixing and applying HabiStat™ to disinfect equipment as well as any tools or equipment brought in from off the property will help to decrease a flock's exposure.

Another tool to implement is offering a high-quality feed that meets all the nutritional requirements for the flock. Chickens that are lacking nutritionally in areas such as vitamins and minerals are more susceptible to developing infections. The Crystal

Creek® Family Flock® poultry feed line is formulated using 100% proteinate and chelated trace minerals and high levels of vitamins to ensure the diverse nutritional needs of a small backyard flock are met. Another benefit of the Family Flock® feed line is the highly effective, natural pathogen blocker all formulas contain. It binds the GI pathogens, such as Salmonella or E. coli, in the gut and renders them harmless once excreted. This reduces the risk of serious pathogens in the bird's digestive tract as well as decreasing the potential food safety risk for owners.

Free-ranging chickens can create both happy birds and happy owners. It is important to be aware of the potential challenges and consequences when determining how to best keep your flock healthy and safe. The knowledgeable staff at Crystal Creek® is here to answer any questions you may have on free-ranging your chickens. Give us a call today.

References available upon request.