

How_To_Sex_Day_Old_Chicks_2004.txt

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Subject: Article on how to sex day old chicks....

Box after box of hatchlings (some but an hour old) are brought in and placed before the chick sexer at waist level. Over and over he scoops up a chick with his left hand, expels its droppings with a squeeze of his thumb, opens its vent with his fingers, peers through the magnifying lenses attached to his spectacles and determines its sex. Then he deposits the tiny bird in one of two bins. Two thousand vent sexes and a good day's work later, his hands and his shirt front are still immaculate. And if you buy sexed chicks from this chick sexer's employer, the sort is guaranteed 95% accurate.

In slow motion, here's how he separates those chicks.

There are three cardboard boxes on the table: one in front of him (full of unsorted hatchlings) and the pullet and cockerel bins to right and left. Each container is divided into four compartments to buffer the shock of long-distance travel when the young birds are shipped the next day. A milk carton, its top removed and two adjoining sides cut down halfway, stands behind the "unsorted" container with the low sides angled to face front.

With his left hand he scoops up a chick, catching-its neck between his middle and ring fingers and its legs between his ring finger and pinky. In one swoop the ball of fuzz is perfectly balanced and duck-tailed rump up.

In chickens—as in other birds—the intestinal and genitourinary tracts both empty into a common cavity known as the cloaca. Before this area can be examined, the chick has to be evacuated (rid of the blob of umbilical dinner that remains in its lower intestine). The chick sexer holds the baby toward the milk carton and squeezes its lower abdomen once with his left thumb. A small amount of feces

squirts into the container, and he finishes the job quickly before another mess erupts.

The chick—still held in the same grasp—is raised close to the chick sexer's face, and his left thumb presses the left edge of the vent up and over so that the interior border is turned toward the bird's neck and secured in that position. A fraction of a second later, Scheline's right thumb and first finger spread apart the other half of the orifice. The margin is folded down toward the abdomen and held there with a firm pinch. The aperture is then fully open (wide from back to belly, narrower thigh to thigh) and it's possible to peer inside. Some sorters use the right index finger to test the tissues for elasticity. Lyle, however, depends entirely on making a visual check with his eyes.

Vent sexing is based on the fact that the hatchling cockerel has a rudimentary sex organ called the "male process" . . . a very small, glossy, transparent bulb that protrudes from amid the second of three cloacal folds inside the cavity. The structure is independent of the surrounding tissues and pokes out almost as far as the vent opening when the border is pushed down far enough for examination. If you're not farsighted, you can see the process with the naked eye. In contrast, the typical female chick has a shallow depression—or just a trace of swelling—at the same site.

So far, so good . . . but here's the catch: One day-old cockerel out of five isn't so distinctly characterized. He has a smaller bulb, a flat bulb, a bulb that protrudes downward instead of up or a grooved bulb that looks more like a fold than a male process.

More confusing still, 40% of day-old pullets have organs that resemble those of the males. This happens because embryos of both sexes start out with male-like bumps. In the majority of females, the process begins to shrink by the second week of incubation and

has vanished by hatching time. Not so, however, with two pullets out of rive. Their lingering protuberances are usually smaller than cockerels', but are sometimes as large as the average male bulb. As the female grows older, the process will continue to regress . . . just as the questionable male organ will extend and grow larger. But you can't wait more than a day or two to vent sex a chick. It has to be done before the youngster eats and thus distends its lower alimentary tract.

Fortunately, the trained eye can still discern differences between the true male process and the female protuberance at hatch. The cockerel's organ (whether regular, small, flat or divided) consists of compact, lustrous tissue that continues to hold its shape when exposed. The female bulb—even a large one—is less conspicuous and lacks sheen and elasticity. When the vent is spread apart and the process revealed, the pullet's bump doesn't hold but fades away in seconds. If the bulge is touched, it will depress.

Accordingly, when Lyle sees a shiny bulb-shaped process protrude to the vent's lower edge and stay put, he plops the chick into the cockerel bin. And if the same area bears a shallow depression, just a trace of dull protuberance or a larger bulb that fades away, he plunks the bird—with a somewhat wider smile—into the pullet container. The occasional case he's unsure of goes back into the unsorted box to be examined again later. The cloacal folds rearrange in the meantime, and the process becomes easier to sex.

The chick sexer's large, blunt fingers and make-light-of-it modesty belie the deftness and coordination necessary for his fast, decisive skill. Undoubtedly, though, vent sexing does take a knack. The sorter must be firm and gentle simultaneously: If the chick is held too tightly, it will weaken and later die. Lyle knows sexers who work a third again as fast as he does—employing a different hand scoop—but their hatchlings don't always survive. Yet you can't be

too queasy about hurting the little birds, or you'll never get their vents open far enough to expose the phallus and will end up trying to make guesses about the upper cloacal folds.

Speed is important too. If you're not swift about completing the check—or if you press down on the lower part of the abdomen as you pinch back the right edge of the vent—another glob of feces will erupt and coat the cavity. When that happens, you blot the area. Nevertheless, I'd say that any nimble-fingered homesteader could vent sex a good 75% of his day-old chicks, without an instructed apprenticeship, just by knowing what to look for and how to spread the aperture. (The other 25% of discriminations probably do take a tutored eye.)

If you want to learn the art, it's best to put your fingers through the motions of hand scoop and vent spread before you try to sex a live bird. Dime stores carry little rubber replica chicks intended as babies' bathtub toys. Buy one, magic-marker a small circle at the appropriate place and practice.

As a novice chicken sexer myself, I find that the most difficult manipulation of the technique is evacuation of the chick with the left thumb. Only rarely do I find that exact spot on the lower belly which relaxes the sphincter when pushed. What I do instead is sex my hatchlings over a large laundry tub.

The problem is that if the chick isn't evacuated beforehand, the feces seep into the cavity as you spread the vent apart. This isn't the clean-cut eruption the thumb press effects: It drips, I blot . . . it squirts, I blot . . . and again, until the aperture is clean and I can peer in. This procedure takes more time and is certainly messier, but it works. When I'm done, the toilet paper goes in the wastepaper basket and I turn on the tub faucet and flush the rest of the droppings down the drain.

THE DOWN COLOR SORT

Not all chicks have to be vent sexed: A variety of crossbreeds can be sorted out by the color and markings of their down. In these cases the juvenile coloring is a sex-linked characteristic . . . that is, the pullets' coloration is determined by mania's gene, the cockerels' by pa's. The most important factor to remember about these pairings is that the method doesn't hold if the breeds of hen and rooster are switched.

1. Gold breed roosters mated to silver and penciled breed hens produce buff or red females and cream, white or smoky males. Either sex may or may not show narrow striping. Gold breed roosters include Rhode Island Reds and the buff varieties of the following breeds: Leghorn, Minorca, Wyandotte, Plymouth Rock and Cochin.

Silver and penciled hens include; White Wyandotte, Columbian Wyandotte, Silver-laced Wyandotte, Silver-penciled Wyandotte, Columbian Plymouth Rock, Silver-penciled Plymouth Rock, Light Sussex, Light Brahma and Dark Brahma.

In addition, Brown Leghorn, Partridge Wyandotte, Partridge Plymouth Rock and Golden-laced Wyandotte roosters can be crossed with Columbian Wyandotte, Columbian Plymouth Rock, Light Sussex and Light Brahma hens to produce chicks with the same sex-linked distinctions.

2. Barred Rock hens crossed with any brown-head rooster, or with any black or buff variety, produce black males with white head spots and yellow beaks, shanks and toes. The female chicks are all black above with dark beaks, shanks and toes. The same offspring results from the crossing of a Barred Rock hen and any recessive white rooster—White Wyandotte, Langshan, Minorca or Dorking—with the exception of the recessive White Plymouth Rock.

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Incidentally, three "pure" or standard breeds produce chicks that can sometimes be sorted on the basis of their down markings. One of these is the Barred Rock . . . hatchlings with yellow head spots are males. Both sexes of New Hampshire and Buff Orpington chicks generally hatch totally buff. Some, however, have a black head spot and are pullets. Others may have off-white streaks through the buff down at the upper wing joints (shoulders), and these are cockerels. The male marking is more common than the female, but is also more difficult to detect.

Before the professional chick sexer overhauls a box of buffs, he "sight-sexes" them quickly for markings. The darkest buff chicks tend to be males, but—since that isn't always true—each hatchling of that color goes through the vent check.

tenzicut - who has never tried this..... yet!