

Washing Chickens Before a Show

By Alan Stanford, Ph.D.

Washing birds for a show is easy but takes good preparation and a lot of time. Do not get a bird wet until you have assembled everything you need. Of course, you need things to clean and dry your birds. You will also need a clean place to put your clean birds; don't put them into a dirty coop.

The most important part of washing birds is drying them. Birds are chilled and then get sick more easily than you might imagine. A light breeze on a hot day can be dangerous for a wet chicken. Have a good supply of towels. It takes at least one towel for each bird. You also need a hair dryer.

The second most important part of washing birds is to be gentle. If you are not gentle, you will break feathers; your feathered friend will be stressed when you wash, unless you are gentle. If you are gentle, birds learn to tolerate being washed and to love being blow-dried.

Wash your birds at least two days before the show. Your birds will preen their feathers into place and use their oil gland to restore their sheen. Keep the coops extra clean from just before you wash your birds to when you leave for the show.

Get These Before You Wash a Bird

A clean coop

A warm draft free place to wash and dry your birds

One towel for each bird

A hair dryer

Baby shampoo

Toothbrush

Cream rinse (optional)

Laundry bluing if your birds have white feathers

Glycerin

Two tubs, one for washing one for rinsing, a kitchen sink, laundry tub, or bathtub are good places to wash

Washing Your Birds

Use warm water. Don't chill or scald your birds.

Wet the entire bird before washing because dry feathers break much more easily than wet feathers. Get your bird wet with water and a little baby shampoo. Without a little shampoo, natural oils make the feathers difficult to get wet.

If you have a feather legged bird, do not pick the manure off the foot feathers. The feathers will break. After your bird has stood in water for 15 minutes, you can rinse the manure off those foot feathers.

After the feathers are completely wet, put shampoo on them and gently work it into the feathers. Pay special attention to the feathers around the vent. Gently scrub your bird's feet with the toothbrush. You can also stroke stained feathers with a toothbrush dipped in baby shampoo. Only stroke in one direction, from the base of the feather toward the tip.

Rinse your bird thoroughly with warm water. Be sure to rinse out all the shampoo. You can use conditioner, it helps rinse out the soap and conditions the feathers. Look for feathers that did not get clean. Add more shampoo and wash the problem areas.

Final Rinse Solution

After rinsing out all the shampoo, you can give a final rinse in glycerin, bluing, and warm water. Bluing makes white feathers appear whiter; you don't need bluing if your bird has no white feathers. You can buy glycerin at a drugstore; sometimes you have to ask the pharmacist because they use glycerin to make lotions. If you add too much bluing, you will have a blue bird; I've seen quite a few. Here is the formula for the rinse water:

Rinse Solution

Warm water (not hot, not cold)

2 ounces (4 tablespoons) glycerin per gallon of water

2 drops bluing per gallon of water

Dip your bird in the warm rinse water. Hold your bird a few seconds while the water drains. Immediately wrap your bird in a towel; do not leave it uncovered, even on a hot

day.

Dry Your Bird Carefully and Thoroughly

You must thoroughly dry your bird. Never leave a wet bird in even a slight breeze, even if it is a hot day.

Wrap your bird in a dry towel and place your bird in a draft free warm place. After 5 minutes, rewrap your bird in a dry section of the towel.

Blow-dry your bird with the hair dryer. Be VERY careful with the heat. I have seen birds with blistered chests caused by an enthusiastic novice. One good safeguard is to always have the palm side of your fingers between your bird and the dryer.

My favorite hair dryer has a “turbo” button that gives high-speed unheated air. I keep the dryer set to medium (NEVER hot). I keep the turbo button pressed about 80% of the time.

If your birds are docile enough, you can line up 4 to 6 of them and blow-dry them together. I give each bird about 10 seconds and rotate around the group.

Wet feathers stay plastered to your bird’s body. It helps if you gently lift the wet feathers and separate them while blow-drying. Remember to be gentle, you don’t want to break feather or stress your bird.

Be sure your bird is completely dry. Don’t let the warmth of the feathers fool you; your bird must be dry.

Final Steps

Put your clean bird into a clean coop. Why not give your friend a little treat like chopped greens, a little grain, a section of winter squash, or that special treat you know she loves? Keep the coop clean until you go to the show.

Enjoy the show. Talk to people about your birds and theirs. Corner the judge and learn from him. Disagree alone; learn in public.