

Red mite attack

Have you got red mites in your chicken houses? Most poultry keepers find red mites on their chickens very distressing. Eradicating them can be difficult. Farming is a funny business. It is trying to manipulate natural systems to mankind's end. Sometimes this can be with catastrophic results, such as the encroaching deserts or the decreasing rainforests. Even in sustainable systems, such as organic systems, we are manipulating nature. This manipulation sometimes causes opportunities for other life forms to excel. Such is the case with red mites. By putting, what were basically jungle fowl into groups in small wooden sheds we created the opportunity for red mites to thrive.

A few facts about red mites Red Mites do not live on chickens; they just feed on them by sucking their blood, and then for just an hour or two at a time. After feeding, gorged and red, (they are normally a grey colour, and if they haven't fed for a long time, white), they crawl back to the convenient nooks and crannies, that we have made for them, to lay their eggs. These larvae can hatch and mature into egg laying adults in as little as 3-4 days. Hence, especially in warm weather, you can have an explosion of the red mite population to the point which is called an infestation. The red mites have numerous ways of finding your chickens in the first place. They may have come on the birds, although, as mentioned, they normally do not stay on the bird. They can survive without food for 8-10 months, so if your house previously had chickens they could still be there. In warm weather they can even survive in the grass. It is possible that they can be carried around on the clothes of people or on poultry equipment; they can certainly be carried by wild birds. The cumulative effect of providing food for thousands of these bloodsuckers will affect the bird. They will become anaemic, listless, egg production will fall and you will notice more eggs being laid on the floor, as the birds will want to avoid the infestation in and around the nest boxes. Feed consumption will increase and birds will sometimes appear reluctant to go in at night. There could be an increase in vent pecking and cannibalism. Eggs may be stained with crushed mite faeces. You won't find any mites on the birds, but if you go into the house with a torch at night you should be able to see them moving around. They seem attracted to white cloth; if you hang one up in the house you can often see them on it in the morning. How can you deal with red mites? So how to deal with them. First of all let's consider the red mite's home. Eliminate, as much as possible, areas that the red mite can live in. Don't put roofing felt in your house. This provides the ideal living space for the mite. Many people report that whitewashing the interior of the chicken house with a lime white wash not only reduces the red mites but also lightens the inside. This may help to maintain egg production in the shorter days. The use of steam cleaners or blowtorches is also effective. There are, obviously, many chemicals on the market, which will claim the destruction of red mites. Unfortunately mites are a bit like head lice, (if you have any kids you will know what I mean); you get rid of the live lice and another lot of eggs hatch. Even if you manage to get rid of this lot by treating at just the right time they will insist on going to school and getting re-infested. Just like headlice the red mite builds up immunity to the chemicals over time. It only takes a small survival rate and within a very short time your house can be infested again. Chemicals are expensive, can be environmentally damaging and treat the problem rather than solve the problem. In a way red mites are a little easier to deal with than head lice because, unlike the head lice, the red mite does not live on the bird, it lives in the chicken house. We also know that it only feeds at night when the birds are roosting. Suspending the perches so that they do not touch the house at any point and covering the rope with axle grease or Vaseline to stop the mites walking down the rope will greatly reduce the opportunity for the mite to feed. The birds don't mind movement in their perch; it imitates their natural environment. Putting the perches in a grid will reduce the movement to some extent. Alternatively, if you have a large enough chicken house, freestanding perches can be used. Again, the point of contact with the ground needs to be well greased and ideally this point should be made of metal. If you have not as yet acquired your hen house consider those made of plastic and metal rather than wood. Such houses do not allow the nooks and crannies of wooden houses. On the down side such houses don't tend to look as good and their construction is not so sustainable as wooden houses. Have you found a good way of controlling red mites? Please go to the blog and add your comments [http://keepingchickenswales.wordpress.com/Stephen Merritt](http://keepingchickenswales.wordpress.com/StephenMerritt) The Welsh Poultry Centre