



Predators for Free-Ranging Poultry

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Introduction

Predation is a common risk for poultry that are allowed to roam freely outdoors (fig. 1). Predator types may differ depending on the region. Therefore, this article may not cover all possible predators for a specific geographical region. This article provides an overview of potential flock predators, how to identify the predator, and approaches to avoid predation in your free-range poultry flock.



Figure 1. Free-ranging poultry, in this case, broiler chickens, may be at risk of predation day and night. (Photo courtesy of Leonie Jacobs.)

Predator Risks Depend on the Time of Day

Predator risk depends on the time of day, as predators can be nocturnal (active during the night), diurnal (active during the day), crepuscular (active mostly during twilight), or cathemeral (active during hours of daylight and darkness). The majority of mammalian predators are nocturnal. Yet owned and feral cats and dogs may prey on birds or eggs in the flock any time of day. Most predation will occur at night, in part because of the lack of people keeping the predator at bay at that time.

Examples of diurnal predators are

- Cats (when birds are small)
- Dogs
- Birds of prey
- Snakes (eggs or when birds are small) (fig. 2)

Examples of nocturnal predators are

- Rats
- Raccoons (fig. 3)
- Skunks (fig. 4)
- Opossums
- Foxes
- Owls
- Weasels and minks
- Bobcats
- Coyotes (fig. 5)
- Bears

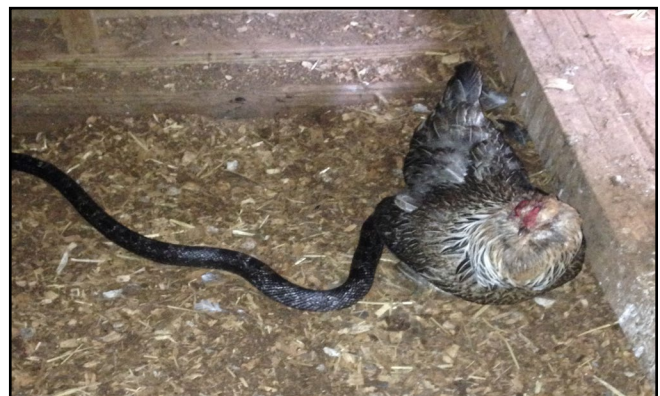


Figure 2. Snakes will prey on small poultry or eggs when given the opportunity. In this case, the snake did not have a chance as the bird was too big. (Photo courtesy of Stephen Norris.)



Figure 3. Raccoons are opportunistic and will prey on poultry at night, regardless of the birds' size. They are very inventive and can be a challenge to keep away from your flock. (Photo courtesy of Pixabay.)



Figure 4. Skunks are excellent diggers, so they may dig below or crawl underneath fences to access your flock. (Photo courtesy of Pixabay.)



Figure 5. Coyotes may hunt and kill your birds during the day, while the birds are out in the range, or at night, when in the coop. (Photo courtesy of Pixabay.)

Determining the Predator Based on Evidence at the 'Crime Scene'

If predation occurs in the flock, it is sometimes possible to determine which predator attacked the flock. Predators can leave behind tell-tale signs that will be helpful in preventing future attacks (table 1). A wildlife camera could be just the tool to identify potential predators near your flock. These can be set to take a picture or record a video when motion is detected.

Table 1. Investigating the "crime scene" after potential predation can help identify the perpetrator. Some examples are given here.

Evidence	Likely predator(s)
Missing adult birds	Bird of prey, bobcat, coyote, dog, fox
Missing birds, but lots of feathers are left behind	Coyote, fox, hawk
Missing eggs or chicks	Bird of prey, cat, coyote, fox, opossum, rat, skunk, snake
Missing heads	Bird of prey, raccoon
Missing limbs	Raccoon
Lacerations near the cloaca	Opossum, other chicken (cloacal pecking), weasel (or relatives)
Dead injured birds	Dog, weasel (or relatives)
Dead intact birds	No predation, but possible disease or due to piling (birds huddling and climbing on top of each other, suffocating bird underneath)

Prevention of Predation

There are some options to prevent predation. Knowing what predator is roaming around your flock will help with choosing the best method of prevention. A digging predator will require a different approach than a flying predator. Improving flock housing and surrounding fences will be key to prevent predation. A forest-like area for the chickens will reduce chances of birds of prey attacking the flock, as these predators prefer open fields. Here are some tips to prevent predation:

- Keep birds inside during certain times of the day.
- Keep birds constrained to a specific area using a fence or enclosed run with overhead cover.
 - Bury the wire (1-2 feet) to prevent digging.
 - Include a skirt on the outside to prevent successful digging.
 - Low voltage electric fencing will deter predators to enter the run.
- Provide overhead cover for poultry on the range:
 - Natural shelter like trees, shrubs, and other vegetation to hide in/under
 - Artificial shelters to avoid and hide from predators
- Owl and/or coyote decoys may work but not for the long-term.
- Remove debris for predators to hide or nest in near the coop.
- Lock up or remove attractants such as feed, waste, and eggs.
- Use a guard animal such as an alpaca, a guard dog, a donkey or even geese (fig. 6).



Figure 6. Geese can be successful deterrents for some daytime predators. (Photo courtesy of Leonie Jacobs)

Summary

Poultry flocks that are allowed to range outside are at risk of being preyed upon by domestic and wild animals. Preventative measures can be taken to limit this risk. If predation does occur, there are clues to find out which predator has attacked to prevent future attacks.

Additional Resources

Jacob, J. 2023. "Predator Management for Small and Backyard Poultry Flocks." National Cooperative Extension. <https://poultry.extension.org/articles/poultry-management/predator-management-for-small-and-backyard-poultry-flocks/>.

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