

Protect Backyard Birds from Predators



Kayleigh Moyle

Figure 1. Hawks and owls are skilled aerial predators.



Jon Moyle

Your backyard flock is of great interest to you, providing enjoyment, entertainment, pest control, eggs, meat, garden fertilizer, 4-H and FFA projects, and more. Unfortunately, backyard birds are also quite interesting to other creatures, including dogs, cats, rats, skunks, foxes, coyotes, hawks, owls, opossums, raccoons, snakes, and other predators. Your backyard flock depends on you for housing and safety. Raise birds long enough, and you are likely to lose one now and then to predators. However, if you take the protection of your flock seriously, losses to predation can be kept to a minimum.

Protect Your Birds

Housing is a major concern for backyard flocks and organic poultry operations. Unlike commercial poultry, which have the protection of safe, environmentally controlled, modern housing systems, backyard birds are often housed in old barns, buildings in

need of repair, or structures not designed to effectively house poultry. Therefore, predators often have little trouble gaining access to your backyard birds.

The easiest way to prevent predators from feasting on your flock is to keep the flock indoors in a secure structure at all times. However, for most backyard and organic flock owners, this is not feasible or is simply not an acceptable or desired option. Still, the flock should have access to some type of shelter, such as a house or coop, that they can return to during inclement weather and at night. Birds should be trained to return to the house every night, and you should close the doors every night for your flock's protection. Situating the coop close to your own house not only discourages wild animals, but also allows for quick action if an invasion should occur.

If the birds are raised from chicks in a house or coop, they will return to lay eggs and roost at night after foraging during the day. **You can train adult birds**

by first keeping them penned up for a week or so, and then subsequently letting them out late in the day so that they don't wander too far before dark. If they all return to the house, you can slowly start letting them out earlier.

Make sure the house remains varmint-proof. Rats and mice may gnaw holes that provide opportunities for other unwanted critters. A vigilant rodent control program is key to controlling predators. Additional information on rodent control is available at <http://msucare.com/pubs/publications/p2824.pdf> and www.poultry.msstate.edu/pdf/extension/rodents.pdf.

Consider placing your chicken house or coop on blocks or constructing it a foot or so off the ground. This will discourage chicken snakes, skunks, rats, and other predators from living under the house and stealing eggs, chicks, or young birds. The floor and side-walls should be tight and free of holes. This means you need to patch even knot holes or wide cracks between boards. Snakes, mice, and rats need only a very small opening to squeeze through.

If your birds are allowed to range and forage outside the house or coop, **some type of fence is almost always a necessity**. A fence not only keeps the birds confined to an area of your choice and prevents problems with neighbors, but it will also (if constructed properly) keep out most predators. Some type of wire mesh (welded wire mesh, poultry wire, hardware cloth, electric netting) with openings that are smaller than 1 inch tends to work best. Materials with openings larger than 1 inch are likely less expensive, but keep in mind that some predators, especially raccoons, are quite dexterous and are known for reaching through the wire and killing chickens they can grab.

Make sure the fence is tall enough to prevent predators from entering. Coyotes, for example, can jump a 4-foot fence with ease. If possible, consider covering the top of the pen with netting or wire mesh, as well. This will help protect birds from airborne predators, such as hawks and owls (**Figure 1**). A top will also help keep wild birds from entering the pen and interacting with your birds. Wild birds can carry diseases that may be harmful or fatal to your birds, so the less interaction that occurs between your birds and the wild bird population, the better. Fencing material (hardware cloth, welded wire mesh, and so forth) should be long enough so that the bottom 6 to 12 inches is turned outward from the pen on the ground and buried so that predators cannot dig under the fence.

Many people have installed baby monitors or even security cameras in their coops. Some backyard enthusiasts have also installed motion-sensor lights to help deter nocturnal predators. Unfortunately, there are those **times when the predator may be human** instead of animal. If birds turn up missing from a well-secured

house or pen with no evidence of animal predation, the possibility of human involvement should be seriously considered. Motion-sensor lighting may help keep both the two-legged and four-legged predators away from your chickens. Other folks have set up trail or game cameras with night vision capabilities to see what types of predators live in the area and the times they are active. A sturdy lock on the entry door might also be an advantage. **Knowing your enemy is critical** if you expect to win the war against predators.

Common Predator Suspects

Do not ignore predation. If a predator does make it to your flock, the problem will only worsen over time if the predator thinks the chow line is now open. Depending on your situation, take steps to remove the predator or provide better protection for your chickens. Otherwise, expect to lose more birds. Remember there are both **daytime threats** (dogs, cats, foxes, coyotes, snakes, hawks) and **nighttime threats** (cats, foxes, snakes, skunks, opossums, owls, rodents). **Table 1** lists common predators of backyard birds and the signs associated with them. Most predators are reluctant to travel across wide-open spaces. Therefore, having your coop and chicken run in an open area will provide increased protection.

Should predation occur in your flock, it may be difficult to determine the culprit. However, in many cases, predators leave calling cards that will help identify them. This information is valuable to help you determine a course of action. For example, a dog usually kills chickens just for the fun of it, and usually during the day. Several dead birds may be discovered with the carcasses mauled but not eaten.

Foxes are sly, careful predators that may stake out the chicken coop for days or even weeks before attacking. Like dogs, they will often kill every chicken they can catch. A fox may remove several birds from the coop, and there may often be feathers on the ground both in and outside the coop. A coyote leaves signs similar to a fox, so it may be hard to tell which is the culprit. However, a coyote often tunnels under the pen or coop or forces its way in, leaving evidence, while a fox rarely leaves evidence behind.

A raccoon may only visit once a week or so and generally will eat only the head and perhaps the crop. Often, only one bird is attacked, but sometimes more than one will become a victim. Raccoons are also good egg thieves. Opossums leave similar signs as raccoons and are usually looking for eggs or young chicks. However, they will attack and eat adult birds. Raccoons and opossums usually leave birds they have killed in the pen or coop because they have trouble dragging them away.

Table 1. Common predators of backyard birds and signs they may leave.	
Predator	Signs
Coyote	Whole bird missing Scattered feathers Will dig into pens
Cat	Chicks or young birds missing
Dog	Birds usually mauled but not eaten
Fox	Whole bird missing Scattered feathers
Hawk	Bird eaten on-site Lots of feathers Small birds may be carried off and eaten in a nearby tree Look under nearby trees for feathers
Mink/Weasel	Dead birds neatly piled Back of head and neck eaten
Owl	Head and neck eaten Lots of feathers Sometimes whole birds missing Look under nearby trees for feathers Happens at night
Opossum	Whole birds consumed, feathers and all Sometimes leave only the wings or feet
Rat	Chicks or young birds missing Partially eaten chicks
Raccoon	Breasts and entrails eaten Backs bitten Scattered feathers Will reach into pens and grab birds
Skunk	Entrails eaten but not muscles or skin Lingering odor

Skunks pose a threat to young chicks and eggs. A skunk will rarely attack large adult birds. Skunks often eat the head off baby chicks, and eggs are often opened at one end and the contents eaten. Skunks often leave a telltale odor, so you know it's them.

Hawks and owls attack from above and are skilled predators. They will often fly off with smaller birds, so look under nearby trees for feathers and bones. Hawks and owls kill in similar ways, often eating the head and neck and perhaps leaving deep cuts in other portions of the bird from their sharp talons and beaks. While you may be able to eliminate some predators, eliminating hawks and owls is not an option. All **hawks and owls in the U.S. are federally protected** by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and killing them could result in a very hefty fine and/or possibly jail time. Therefore, in the case of hawks and owls, better flock protection is the preferred (and likely less expensive) option over

predator elimination. You can string thin wire or even fishing line over the bird pen or run, thereby making it hard for predators to fly in.

You have at least some level of control over the predator population based on your management program and practices. Don't make a predator problem worse by unknowingly providing a readily available food source for predators. Having **an accessible food supply is a guaranteed predator attractant**. Many backyard enthusiasts provide extra "treats" for their birds along with the regular feed allotment. Anything not cleaned up, whether it is feed or treats, is an open invitation to hungry predators looking for food. Predators will not stop at just feed or treats, but will actively seek out your birds, as well. Humans are not the only creatures that have figured out chickens are pretty tasty.

Summary

The backyard flock is many things to many people. Its value is not only in the meat and eggs it provides, but also in the enjoyment and satisfaction it provides to countless individuals and families across the country. However, it is your responsibility to keep your birds safe. The threat level is always high, and your flock is always at risk from air and ground attacks by both nocturnal and daytime predators. Take adequate steps to avoid such attacks. Provide adequate housing and fencing, and check often for breaches in your defenses

that would allow access to predators. Train birds to return to the coop at night, and lock them in as soon as it's dark for their own protection. Remember some predators, such as raccoons, are quite dexterous and can easily open simple latches; therefore, make sure the lock is predator-proof. Know your enemy and learn the type of calling card it leaves. This will help you identify the predator you are up against and develop a plan of attack. Protect your backyard flock from predators, and they will provide many happy hours of entertainment and enjoyment for you and your family.

Publication 2853 (POD-01-16)

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Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director