

# Identifying Healthy Chicks

Clayton Botkin

## Introduction

This article is meant to address a common problem I see more and more among people purchasing birds at sales and auctions. Sales and auctions, while providing a great service to the small-scale poultry producers, also facilitate the sale of perhaps not-so-healthy birds. This problem is not a secret and has been much debated in times past. I wrote this article with the intention of providing some guidelines on what to look for when purchasing chicks or young birds at an auction or sale. Many of these principles may also be applied to the purchase of adult birds as well. Although I have attempted to address as many issues as I can think of, this guide is by no means comprehensive, and remember, these auctions and sales are always buyer-beware.

## Considerations:

- **Face & Eyes**- the face should be clean and free from any build-up or fluids. Any fluids, coming from the eyes or nostrils, or sign of problems should be avoided. The eyes should be bright, active and adjust quickly to changing light conditions. If you can, always check to ensure the comb is correct for the breed that they are labelled. Note that as young chicks, it may not be possible to ensure the correct comb type. As the chicks grow, the comb should be easily distinguishable. Also, remember that male chicks grow combs faster than females, so you may want to consider that when making purchases of chicks all of the same age. You should also be wary of chicks of multiple ages combined in a sale cage, as this comb-sexing method could be inaccurate. The head should also be carried high and above the back in a natural fashion. Watch for chicks that are huddled and have their heads sunk back into their backs. This is an indicator of ill health.
- **Breathing**- ensure the chick is breathing normally and breathing is not strained or laboured. Strained breathing would be described as any muscle movements that are not normal in regular respiration. An example of strained breathing would be the extension of the neck in a situation where there may be a partial blockage of the airway. You should not be able to hear the chicks' breath. Normal breathing should be silent to our hearing. If not, it can indicate any of numerous possible respiratory issues and should be avoided at all costs. These chicks of course should be immediately removed by the seller, and likely should not have been there in the first place. The chick(s) should also not regularly open their mouth to breath. They may do this if they are in conditions that are too hot, as it is a natural mechanism for the bird to cool its body, similar to panting in dogs.
- **Respiration Rate**- regular rhythmic breathing patterns should dominate the normal respiration of the chick(s). Anything outside of a rhythmic pattern should be cause for concern and the seller notified immediately.
- **Down & Juvenile Feathers**- should be clean and free of accumulations of waste or bedding. Down should be solid and smooth over the entire body, except where there may be emerging feathers. Feathers grow first along the wings, with the primary and secondary flights, closely followed by the mail tail feathers and then followed by feathers on the back and front edges of the breast. Smooth and uniform growth of these feathers through the down indicates healthy babies. If the feathers have grown out enough, or on older birds, have a close look at the main tail feathers. If the bird has experienced any form of physiological stress during the growth of the feather, you will notice a weak band across its surface, where the barbules have rather released, creating a thin spot on the web. It may be worth asking the seller if they are aware of the stress. It can be something as simple as a missed feeding or a vaccination, but it also could be an indicator of something more complex.
- **Back and Wings**- if you are able to handle the chicks, try folding out a wing, and seeing its reflex to return back to normal carriage. A healthy, well-conditioned chick will have a quick return, so long as the chick has enough wing-development at this point in its growth. This will not work for chicks that are young, likely below a month of age, as the retraction comes from development of the breast muscle and this can be slow in some breeds. The wings in some juvenile chicks may hang slightly low if the muscles that normally support them have not grown in properly yet, but be wary of slipped wing and angel wing in

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waterfowl. I would recommend avoiding the purchase of these chicks if possible. The back should be full and carried properly for the breed.

- **Rump, Vent and Cushion**- ensure they birds are clean from buildup of droppings or dirt accumulations around the vent. This tells you a lot about the conditions the babies were kept and reared in. Any indication of blood could be a case of coccidiosis, a good reason not to buy the birds. This is a very large feat to overcome for a new person entering the hobby and will often lead to disappointment in a short time frame. It is also a very good practice to inspect the droppings in the pen for any sign of blood to avoid the coccidiosis issue. There is more about coccidiosis at the end of this article.
- **Tail**- most breeds exhibit their proper tail carriage young in age. Try to be sure of what you are buying and what they should look like. If the tail is carried pointed down and droopy, it may be an indicator of poor health and cause for concern.
- **Feet, Legs and Toes**- ensure the correct number of toes for your breed and conformation. Often, and especially with five-toed breeds, you can tell how the toes are arranged, if they are desirable and correct at a very young age. With Faverolles, they can immediately be culled for toe number and shortly after for toe configuration. Try to avoid getting birds with the incorrect number of toes, or duck footed at all costs, as these issues are very hard to get out of your flock. Also, be on the lookout for knock-knees or any babies that do not seem to walk normally. The seller is likely trying to merely dump their culls if you see this.
- **Overall Body and Condition**- Look for chicks that are lively and “bouncy”. They will usually stand out. Avoid chicks that are “droopy” with low-hanging wings, low carried heads, and tails, or unusually inactive chicks. Of course, all chicks will be tired at some points, but observe potential purchases for a few minutes before you make your deal to see if they ever wake-up.
- **A backgrounder on coccidiosis:**
  - Coccidiosis is a protozoan that lives in the gut of many animals. In chicks, it is a common cause of mortality. The protozoan can accumulate above normal levels and be detrimental to the health of the chick by destroying the microvillus that lines the outside of the villi of the birds’ intestinal wall. Villi are finger-like projections that protrude out from the wall of the intestine; they are further extended with another set of finger-like projections along their individual walls as well. These are the microvilli. Remember, the primary function of both large and small intestine is absorption of nutrients. The more surfaces exposed to the lumen, or inside of the intestine, the more absorption can occur. Both villi and microvilli are lined internally with capillaries. Capillaries carry blood near the membranes of the intestine, which are normally protected, but the extreme protozoan damage can expose these capillaries, causing blood to escape into the intestine itself. This blood passes through the remainder of the digestive tract and is passed in the feces. Unfortunately, death can come about if the membrane cannot regenerate fast enough, or completely enough to enable the natural absorption of nutrients to occur again. If caught early enough however, it can be treated easily and quickly.

In conclusion, I would encourage all potential purchasers of chicks to contact the breeder and ask many questions. The breeder should be able to tell you the lineage of the birds, any particulars about the breed, such as unique traits, weak periods in the growth of young and potential breeding techniques. Be wary of breeders that cannot provide you this information as they may be just trying to make the sale and not worried about how you do once you get them home. Most serious breeders will enjoy revelling in your consequent success with a breed and are not concerned about the individual sale, but the betterment of the breed and furthering the enjoyment of the hobby. I like to think most of us follow this path, but not all do and that is my reason for writing this article. It is of the utmost importance to perpetuate this great hobby that we all do our dealings, in a fair and honest manner, and I would like to encourage everyone to follow this path for the long-term survival of what we are doing and the great relationships we all develop amongst each other.

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