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Welfare Issues with Caponizing Chickens

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An HSUS Report: Welfare Issues with Caponizing Chickens

Abstract

No U.S. state or federal regulations prohibit the practice of caponizing cockerels—castrating male chickens under one year of age. Crude instructions and surgical implements are readily available to provide any amateur “hobbyist” with the means to perform this procedure, typically on fully conscious, unanesthetized birds. Caponizing has been banned in the United Kingdom due to animal welfare concerns and should be disallowed in the United States.

Introduction

A capon is a young male chicken who has been castrated. The testes of male birds are internal, so the operation requires surgical removal of the reproductive organs through an incision between the last two ribs. The surgery is typically performed on fully conscious animals who have not been anesthetized nor provided any pain relief.¹

Step-by-step instructions for caponizing are readily available through hatcheries* and poultry extension programs.^{2,3} Caponizing kits, commonly including “easy-to-follow instructions,” knife, rib spreader, slotted spoon, probe, forceps, “S” hooks, and cord^{4,5} to tie down the bird, are also sold online[†] and through poultry supply companies. The instruments used to perform the surgery are as unrefined today as they were in the 1920s.⁶

While castration of dogs and cats are performed by trained veterinary professionals in dedicated, aseptic surgical facilities, there are no regulations to prevent chickens from being castrated by unskilled individuals in unsterile conditions.

Capon Production

The overwhelming majority of commercially produced chickens[‡] are strains selectively bred for heavy body weight and rapid growth. In contrast, capons are slower-growing, typically appealing to “the gourmet market and in certain ethnic communities.”⁷

Any breed of chicken can be caponized, but commercial producers use a Cornish and Plymouth Rock cross-bred bird, the same cross typically used in the broiler chicken industry.⁸ Pheasants⁹ and quail¹⁰ may also be caponized. Commercial capon production in the United States is limited to one major company, Wapsie Produce, Inc., “America’s largest producer and marketer of capons,”¹¹ comprised of producers in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota, and a processor in Iowa.¹²

* See: www.strombergschickens.com/products/capon.php and www.mcmurrayhatchery.com/product/caponizing_kit.html.

† See: www.strombergschickens.com/products/capon.php, www.countryhorizons.net/poultry.shtml, www.mcmurrayhatchery.com/product/caponizing_kit.html, and www.larryspoultry.com/books.htm.

‡ For additional information, see: “An HSUS Report: The Welfare of Animals in the Chicken Industry” at www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/welfare/broiler_industry.html, “An HSUS Report: Welfare Issues with Selective Breeding for Rapid Growth in Broiler Chickens and Turkeys” at www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/practices/fast_growth_chickens_turkeys.html, and “An HSUS Report: The Welfare of Birds at Slaughter” at www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/welfare/welfare_of_birds_at_slaughter.html.

Caponization is also practiced by an unknown number of small, backyard producers and hobbyists. Small flock owners who obtain both male and female chicks of breeds selected for egg production may have little use for the young cockerels as they are unable to lay eggs and are not the heavy, fast-growing breeds of the commercial chicken industry, so they may be castrated and raised for meat as capons.

Although cockerels as young as ten days of age may be castrated,¹³ caponization is usually performed when the birds are two- to four-weeks-old. Commercially raised capons are typically slaughtered when they are 15-18 weeks of age.¹⁴ In contrast, commercially raised broiler chickens are slaughtered at just 6-7 weeks.¹⁵

The Surgery

Birds undergoing caponization are rarely anesthetized.¹⁶ Feed and water are removed at least 12 hours prior to the castration so the intestines are not full and crowding in the abdominal cavity is minimized. In preparation for the surgery, the bird's legs and wings are stretched taut and securely fastened to a work surface.¹⁷ Feathers that might obscure the procedure are pulled out. A one-inch incision is made between the last two ribs. The ribs are then spread and each testis is pulled out with a twisting motion until the bean-shaped organ breaks free of the connecting tissues.¹⁸ The incision is not stitched.¹⁹ Practiced caponizers work very rapidly, castrating approximately 200 birds in one hour.²⁰

Complications resulting from improper caponization can arise. The posterior vena cava and the dorsal aorta run along the bird's back and pass between the two testes. If either the vein or the artery is ruptured during the surgery, the bird may bleed to death.²¹ If antiseptics or antibiotics are not used—and even in some cases when they are—infection may develop. Should the infected wound not heal properly, the animal may suffer and eventually die. A condition known as “air puffs” or “wind puffs” occurs sporadically, caused by air accumulation under the skin as the wound heals. In order to correct this problem, the air may be released by repeatedly inserting a sharp, pointed knife^{22,23} or “by puncturing the skin with a pair of shears.”²⁴ It has been estimated that as many as 5% of the birds die during the operation when it is performed by an inexperienced operator, yet even skilled caponizers will kill some birds during the procedure.^{25,26}

Conclusion

Scientists and veterinarians concur that birds can and do feel pain,^{27,28,29,30} and the castration of unanesthetized cockerels is undoubtedly a serious welfare concern. The surgical procedure is vivisection, an operation performed on a fully conscious animal. Complications associated with the castration may arise, especially if the surgery is performed by untrained individuals, as is largely the case when hobbyists learn the techniques through trial and error. The practice of cockerel castration in the United States should be banned on animal welfare grounds as it has been in the United Kingdom.³¹

¹ Stromberg L. 1998. Caponizing, Modern Management, and Profitable Marketing (Pine River, MN: Stromberg Publishing Company, p. 22).

² Ferguson CM. 1926. Capons. Extension Bulletin No. 31 (Revised). Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science. <http://web1.msue.msu.edu/imp/modp1/morefile/E0031.pdf>. Accessed October 27, 2008.

³ Jacob J and Mather FB. 2000. Capons. Department of Animal Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/PS/PS05100.pdf>. Accessed October 27, 2008.

⁴ Murray McMurray Hatchery. 2008. Caponizing kit. www.mcmurrayhatchery.com/product/caponizing_kit.html. Accessed October 27, 2008.

⁵ Country Horizons. 2008. Poultry and game bird supplies. www.countryhorizons.net/poultry.shtml. Accessed October 27, 2008.

⁶ Sears, Roebuck & Co. 1922. “Easy-on” caponizing set. www.afn.org/~poultry/capon.htm. Accessed October 27, 2008.

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The Humane Society of the United States is the nation's largest animal protection organization—backed by 10 million Americans, or one of every 30. For more than a half-century, The HSUS has been fighting for the protection of all animals through advocacy, education, and hands-on programs. Celebrating animals and confronting cruelty. On the Web at humanesociety.org.