



Understanding Standard Weights of Poultry

How to get the most out of the poultry that you grow!

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Many farmers and breeders of poultry have asked, “Why does the *Standard of Perfection* have weights for each breed? Aren’t the biggest birds the best birds? And what about the weights for pullets and cockerels? What age is the standard referring to for these weights?” The standard does not give the exact ages for the young, growing birds. So, let me clarify a few of these questions.

First of all, remember this – the *Standard of Perfection* (including the British Standard) does not give us all the information necessary for breeding and growing standard breeds for production. It is very important that we read/use other resources to gather the information we need to breed and grow the various breeds of standard bred poultry; chickens, turkeys, ducks and geese. Any time we can get data and research that has been done by others it is very important and incredibly helpful! The standard for your breed is not your complete guide but they are very clear on the weight guidelines.

All the *standards* were written with serious considerations from the leading breeders of the specific breeds – example: The Plymouth Rock was admitted to the Standard in 1874. Initially, the very best breeders of the Plymouth Rocks were consulted to write the standard for this breed, the breeders who bred them and used them for both meat and eggs knew most about their breed. They bred them by the thousands! Hatched thousands of eggs! Grew out thousands for meat! Fed lots of hens that produced lots of eggs. They kept lots of detailed records, experimented with all aspects of the birds, so they knew at what weights the birds performed their functions best. They knew the breeds like no one else and they were the ones the APA turned to when it came time to develop and write the standard. So, the breed description and all the details of the breed, including weights are the authority and critical information for your breeding program.

In the *Standard of Perfection*, there are weights for both young and old birds. Let me clarify the ages for weights, specifically for chickens. Remember this, the hen is a female *over* a year old and the pullet is a female *under* a year old. The cock is a male *over* a year old and a cockerel is *under* a year old. Let’s continue using the Plymouth Rock as a breed example. The standard weights for Plymouth Rocks are as follows:

Cock: 9 ½ pounds.

Cockerel: 8 pounds.

Hen: 7 ½ pounds.

Pullet: 6 pounds.

Obviously, as I mentioned above, the age of the cock and hen are 12 months or older. Now keep this in mind, although these are the weights of older birds – these weights will vary depending on the time of year that you weigh your old birds. If you weigh birds in late fall of the year after they have molted, most likely they will be heavier. Why? Because when birds are molting, they are regaining weight preparing to for winter lay. In the spring when male birds are heavy into mating, they usually weigh less because they are thinking about mating more than eating. After a female has been in heavy egg production – in the early fall, she will be much lighter. Why? Because she has put the majority of her energy, nutrition, vitamins and calcium into her eggs instead of her body. That is one of the reasons she molts, to gain her weight back.

Now, what about cockerels and pullets, what are the ages of these weights? I believe that the critical age is the **Point of Lay**. Point of lay is when a pullet begins to lay eggs. Remember, when a female begins to lay eggs, she stops growing. So, the *standard weights* (listed in the book) should be measured when your pullets just start to lay. For the males, that point of maturity is about the same time – so when your females begin to lay, that is a good indication that your males are usually at their cockerel weights. Often times, males reach maturity before the females – grandma used to say, “as soon as you hear the first crow, eat him!” Crowing means he is hitting maturity but he is not necessarily done growing. I recommend that you track his rate of growth carefully to gauge if he hits his standard weight about the same time as the pullets. Remember, the point of lay and the growing cockerels will vary from breed to breed. Pay attention! The average age for the first egg is 24-26 weeks (dual purpose breeds) and 22-24 weeks for egg producing, Mediterranean type breeds. Some pullets start laying earlier than that - the key is whenever they start to lay, that is the *point of lay* and the ideal time to get your weights to compare to the *published weights in the Standard*. To illustrate this, if I am breeding Plymouth Rocks, as soon as I begin to get egg production out of my pullets, that is the indication to weigh my young birds. According to the *Standard of Perfection*, at that time, I want my pullets to weigh six pounds, and my cockerels to weigh 8 pounds.

Let me mention one other important piece of information. Weight is a breed characteristic! Some think that bigger is always better. That is not true. Keep in mind, the bigger the hen, the less eggs she will lay. A Plymouth Rock, or any dual purpose chicken, is meant to lay 180-220 eggs a year. She is not just supposed to “grow big” to be a meat bird! But, the *Standard* does tell us that the weights of our birds are allowed to deviate up to 20% either up or down from the weight listed for the breed, sex and age. Example: If a bird is stated to weigh 5 pounds, a range of 4 to 6 pounds is within the scope of “*the standard weight*”. This rule applies to all large fowl, ducks, geese and turkeys (except for Beltsville Small Whites) So one might ask, if you were to error in one direction or another – when you are selecting, should you choose the lighter or heavier birds? I would point you toward the heavier birds. Especially the dual purpose breeds. Your Plymouth Rocks, New Hampshires, Delawares, Australorps and Orpingtons were developed to be meat birds, we don’t want “small” birds in the breeding pens. So, if you have a bird that is under weight or over weight (both within the 20% range) I would choose the bigger bird.

Keep in mind that different breeds were developed to grow at different rates. All heritage breeds grow slow but some are slower than others. Obviously this means that the ideal processing ages will vary as well. The *rate of growth* is very important for your breed of choice. Below is the listing of the ideal ages for processing.

IDEAL GROWTH RATES/Processing Ages:

- Australorps: 16-18 weeks
- Buckeyes: 16-18 weeks
- Chanteclers: 16-18 weeks
- Delawares: 12-14 weeks
- Dorkings: 22-24 weeks
- Javas: 22-24 weeks
- New Hampshires: 14-16 weeks
- Plymouth Rocks: 16-18 weeks
- Rhode Island Reds: 22-24 weeks

Monitoring the weights of your breeders is critical! It is of utmost importance. Weighing your growing birds is very important for the accuracy of your records concerning rate of growth. Handling your birds in this process is of great importance as well. You cannot properly measure weights without picking up the bird and assessing its body type in your hand. I recommend a minimum of (3) stages of age when weight recordings are most significant. Many breeders will weigh their birds every week (which is great) but you should at least consider weighing at these ages to select the best breeding fowls.

Example: Black Australorps – Ideal processing age 16-18 weeks.

- 1) When they are HALF grown to processing age. (8 weeks)
- 2) At processing age. (16 weeks)
- 3) At point of lay. (24-26 weeks – or whenever they begin to lay)

Let me also remind you of the most significant factors concerning the rates of growth with your growing birds. You can start with outstanding genetics and miss these factors and have improper growth & low weights. Remember, your eyes are your best management tool!

1. **Environment:** Environment includes proper space, not overcrowding, raising the same age of birds together and separating males and females at the proper age. It is also critical that you are culling poor species in the flock throughout the entire growing stages. This reduces the size of the flocks and gives more feeding and drinking spaces for the birds left. Only birds with vigor and vitality should be kept. Obvious deformities should be culled immediately. Including deformed legs, beaks and wing issues – even weak birds. Separate cockerels from pullets as soon as the sexes can be recognized, male birds are usually larger, stronger and more vigorous. This will insure more rapid and uniform growth! (*ideal age is 8 weeks, no later than 12 weeks*)
2. **Temperature:** If the weather is too cold, growth is retarded, and if it's too warm, food consumption will be less, with correspondingly slower growth. Make sure proper shade and daily fresh water are provided. Depending on the climate where you live, if your summer temperatures are normally high, you may want to consider hatching early in the year so that your birds will be grown out before the heat of the summer arrives.
3. **Cleanliness:** Sanitary housing and pasture areas are equally important! Monitoring the cleanliness of your facilities will have a significant impact on the overall health and growth development of your growing birds. Birds that suffer health problems caused by poor husbandry or illness, will always be stunted in growth, at least for a while, and sometimes permanently. I always recommend that you have a cleaning strategy and plan to keep your facilities well ventilated and your outdoor pastures properly seeded.

4. **Proper Nutritional Feed Rations:** Always remember to feed “*age appropriate feed*”. Even with all the other elements of husbandry correct, the incorrect or nutritionally imbalanced feed will have great influence on your growing birds. It is critical that you do your homework to make sure that your flock is getting the (6) food elements that poultry must have; water, proteins, carbohydrates, fats, minerals and vitamins.

Hopefully this information will help with your breeding program, to select breeders and maintain a flock that is characterized with the proper weights that are stated in the *Standard of Perfection*.

For more information, please go to: www.spnusa.com

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