

10 Basic Tips for Protecting Chickens from Predators-GRIT How to Know

You've successfully raised those day-old chicks, and your young hens have just begun laying. Sheer joy describes your emotion as you watch the birds range the lawn, or their enclosed pen, grazing on the tastiest of clover leaves and feasting on grubs scratched up from the earth. And then one day it happens: You discover the bloody remains of your favorite pullet – feathers scattered all over the place. Now it's time to delve into the world of protecting chickens from predators.

No doubt about it, your backyard chickens depend on you for health, housing and safety. In return, they will supply you with eggs, entertainment, pest control, fertilizer, meat and more. But as prey animals, chickens are also the subject of great interest to everything from domestic dogs to snakes, rats, owls and hawks. You should expect to lose a bird to predation occasionally, but these tips will go far to help keep your flock safe.

1. Train your birds to return to the chicken house every evening – and be sure to close it up. If you raise your chicks in that coop, they will naturally return to lay eggs and roost at night after you let them range for the day. Make sure the house is varmint-proof and that you close it up at night once the birds have settled.
2. Raise the chicken coop off the ground by a foot or so to discourage rats, skunks and snakes from taking up residence beneath it and stealing eggs, chicks or young hens. Be certain to keep the henhouse floor tight and patch any holes that snakes and rats can get through.
3. Enclose the coop in a secure poultry run to discourage dogs, coyotes, bobcats and other four-legged carnivores from gaining access to your flock. You can choose poultry wire, welded-wire mesh, electric netting or other fencing materials with sufficiently small openings (or sufficiently high-voltage electrical pulses) to keep your birds in and predators out. Bobcats and coyotes are fantastic jumpers and can easily clear 4-foot-high fences, so build your enclosure appropriately tall, or add a cover net to keep the varmints from vaulting the fence.
4. Cover the chicken run with welded-wire fencing, chicken wire or game-bird netting, or install a random array of crisscrossing wires overhead to discourage hawks and owls from making a buffet out of your birds. If you shut your chickens in the coop at night, owl attacks will not be an issue. But hungry owls are cagey and may grab their meal right at dusk, or slightly beforehand, so if owls are a problem in your area, don't wait until after dark to close up the coop.
5. Choose small-mesh fencing materials for enclosing coops and runs when raccoons and members of the mink or fisher family are among the predators. Raccoons and other fairly dexterous animals are infamous for reaching through larger meshed fencing or chicken wire and killing the chickens they can snag. This is especially important when you keep your chickens in a fully enclosed wire coop/run, such as various chicken tractor (moveable coops without a floor) designs. Although 2-by-3-inch welded-wire fencing is less expensive, you will lose fewer birds if you use 1-by-2-inch mesh or smaller welded wire.
6. Bury galvanized hardware cloth or other welded-wire fencing around the perimeter of the chicken run if you have problems with predators digging beneath your surface fencing.

7. Provide a night light (motion-sensor-activated) that will flood the chicken run with light after dark or install a set of Nite Guard Solar predator-deterrent lights (see advertisement inside front cover). This will keep most nocturnal predators away from the coop.
8. Give your chicken-friendly dogs the run of the chicken yard – particularly at night. Be sure your dogs aren't tempted to chase running, squawking chickens if you choose not to close up the coop at night or choose to leave the dogs in the chicken yard during the day.
9. Prepare yourself to take swift action when you discover predation. You can take measures to eliminate the predator or to eliminate its access to your birds. Failure to do so will result in subsequent losses, if the predators think the buffet line is open.
10. Create a predator-danger zone around the coop and chicken yard. Most terrestrial predators are uncomfortable crossing an area with minimal cover. Go ahead and plant bushes inside the chicken run – your birds will love the shade and nibbling on the leaves – but leave the perimeter as cover-free as you can. Raccoons are less likely to try to work their “hands” into a welded-wire enclosure when they have to sit in the open to do it.