

# CARING FOR BABY CHICKS

by

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Baby pheasants are tougher than you think; yet, they can die in the “blink of an eye.” Like all babies, they have certain minimum requirements which must be met, and a few “extras” which give them an edge for survival. Because the time of year is upon us when our eggs will soon be hatching, we need to make sure that everything is in place for the babies. Again, rather than a long dissertation, a checklist will be more useful for the average breeder.

## CHECKLIST FOR THE CARE OF BABY GAMEBIRDS

### ALL BABIES NEED FEED, WARMTH, WATER AND TLC

- 1. FEED:** Use a good quality, commercial, game bird starter with a 28% to 30% protein content. Baby pheasants grow fast and need the extra protein for the rapid development that they undergo in the first eight weeks of their life. Make this feed freely available to them, scattered over the bottom of the brooder area. The idea is to “permit” them to find food every time they pick at something beneath them. Do not worry about wasting food, it is cheap compared to the value of your chicks.
- 2. WARMTH:** Baby pheasants require a temperature of 90F - 95F for the first couple of weeks of life. You may achieve this with a commercial floor brooder, or by hanging a 250W red heat lamp approximately 18” to 20” above the floor in the center of your brooder area. The chicks will “adjust” themselves to the heat and form a circle around the heated area beneath the lamp. It always amazes me how they figure out the “right” distance. I use one lamp/50 chicks in cold weather (early spring) and one lamp/100 chicks after it warms up (late spring/early summer). However, your region may require some adjustment...so, check your chicks at night to determine how they are doing. If they are “piled” up directly under the light, they are cold, and you need more heat. If they are scattered (no circular pattern), with their wings hunched forward and heads on the litter, they are probably too hot, and you need to raise the lamp.
- 3. WATER:** Baby chicks do not automatically know how to drink. They have to be taught. Dip the beak of each chick in water, before you put them in the brooder. Make sure that they swallowed the water. My wife handles this job at our hatchery. Mary gives each chick two good drinks. If she encounters a stubborn bird (which happens), she gives it a rest, and tries again. No chick goes into the

brooder area without first having its “two good drinks.” To give your chicks an added incentive to drink, add some sugar and red food coloring to the water. The sugar gives them quick energy and tastes good, while the red color attracts them to the watering font. It is also a good idea to **ADD ELECTROLYTES** to the water. Poultry electrolytes are available at most feed stores and are very inexpensive, about \$4 a package. Remember, coming out of a cramped shell into the external world is a very stressful experience. The electrolytes help the chicks “cope” with that stress. **AND**, make sure that you use no-drown fonts, or add marbles to your regular fonts so that the chicks cannot get into water over their toes. More than one healthy chick has drowned or died from exposure by getting soaked in a font that was made for adult birds.

**4. THOUGHTFUL LOGICAL CARE:** There are a few other important details which you need to remember in caring for your baby chicks:

- A. They must NOT be placed on a smooth surface, as this will “produce” spraddled or split legs. The chicks need a surface that they can grip (not slide on). I like ¼” hardware cloth over newspaper. The newspaper absorbs moisture and is easily replaceable, while the hardware cloth allows them to grip and develop their leg muscles.**
- B. Add grit to their diet on the third day. Sprinkle it on their food like salt. Don’t use too much, as they may fill up on grit rather than food. After a while, they will adjust their intake as needed...but, initially, give them just enough to aid in their digestion. At this time, it is all right to begin using a regular chick feeder.**
- C. Make sure that your brooder area is free of drafts. A cardboard draft shield around the brooder area is inexpensive protection.**
- D. After the chicks are several days old, you can add litter to the bottom of the brooder area. By now, they “know” what food is, and won’t eat the litter. Wood shavings make a good litter and cost about \$5 for a large bale. Change the litter frequently. Don’t let the chicks wallow in their own waste, that’s an invitation for disease. Some breeders use litter from the first day with good success. I prefer to wait, but that’s just a personal preference.**
- E. Finally, it is normal to lose some chicks between the 3rd and 4th day. This is the time when they have absorbed the remainder of the stored yolk. If they haven’t been eating or drinking...they die from a lack of nutrition and fluids. Therefore, it is important to watch your chicks very closely during the first four days. Make sure that each bird is eating and drinking.**

**If in doubt...give them a drink, just like you did when they were first born.  
Show them the food. In the end, we all lose some, but we can reduce the  
losses by TLC.**