

## Brooder Basics

### Brooding your birds? Follow these safety tips

*By Susan Chamberlain*

A brooder can be an invaluable tool if used properly. Follow these words of advice to keep your birds safe and happy.

What's the right temperature? According to *The Bird Owner's Home Health and Care Handbook* (Gary Gallerstein, DVM), birds should be kept at temperatures between 88 and 94 degrees Fahrenheit for the first few weeks of life, then gradually reduced to 85 degrees. Consult an experienced breeder or an avian veterinarian for more specific advice on the species you are raising.

Prevent disease! Do not brood chicks from different clutches together.

Learn to recognize signs of overheating and chilling. Chicks that are panting or holding their wings away from their bodies are too hot, while babies huddled together, shivering, are too cold. Brenda Piper who breeds quakers in Massachusetts, said, "Although I trust the temperature reading on the equipment I have, I still use another one or two thermometers and hygrometers in the brooder. That way I can be absolutely certain that the temperature and humidity in the brooder is exactly what I want it to be just in case there is any kind of problem with the sensors. I do the same with my incubator."

Avoid extreme temperature fluctuations. If you must adjust the heat inside the brooder, do it a degree at a time. Read the manual that comes with your brooder for specific directions.

Provide plenty of rest. In the wild and in aviaries, parent birds raise their young in dark nest cavities or nest boxes. Keep the brooder in a dimly-lit area, and remember that the babies' eyes are sensitive to light until they are almost old enough to fledge.

Young chicks require nesting material that provides traction for their feet and legs. Slippery surfaces may contribute to the development of splayed legs. Plastic mesh mats are popular for use inside brooders; they are washable, and they give the baby birds something to grip onto with their feet. I used soft cotton dish towels and cloth diapers (not terry — the loops can trap tiny toes!) inside my Senegal babies' brooder and changed them after each feeding. When the birds were old enough to stand, I used Dri-Dek®, a flexible, grid-style tile fabricated for use on boats and swimming pool decks. Respiratory problems may result from using sawdust or cedar shavings inside the brooder. Be aware that crop impactions can result if babies ingest wood chips or other indigestible matter.

Clean and disinfect hand-feeding utensils and the brooder after each feeding. Work quickly so that the chicks do not get cold in the interim. Keep supplies together to promote efficiency. Remove soiled or wet towels or bedding material. Use a fragrance-free detergent for laundering linens associated with baby birds.