



## When should a free range pullet be allowed out?

Not only has this dilemma caused much soul-searching for parents of teenage girls, but for the owners of the feathered variety that lay eggs the answer hasn't always been clear-cut. The legal definition for free range eggs is that they must be laid by hens that have 'continuous daytime access to outdoor runs'. Over recent years producers have generally operated systems of management that saw birds out on range by around twenty two weeks of age, and although the likelihood was that they were then well in lay, the argument used by producers - and generally accepted by the Egg Inspectorate - was that the eggs were too small to be marketed as free range. Well, times are changing, with supermarkets now selling small free range eggs, often in packs of mixed sizes. Producers will no doubt be supportive of any marketing initiative that helps to achieve a premium and reduce wastage due to down grading, but along with this comes the responsibility of ensuring those eggs are truly free range.

In the West Country, Regional Egg Marketing Inspector Jack Hainsworth and his team are insisting birds are ranging by the time the first eggs are laid. "If packers are selling

eggs under the free range description, it is logical that the hens that laid those eggs should meet the full legal requirements," he told the Ranger. And Ranger Editor John Widdowson, whose farm is within Mr Hainsworth's region, has now got birds out on range by 19 weeks. "Admittedly this is two to three weeks earlier than in the past but it doesn't appear to pose a problem," said John, who believes any reluctance among producers probably stems from previous advice. "When we first started ten years ago the recommendation from the feed salesman was to keep them in until 30 weeks! And such practise was not uncommon in the believe that the hens 'did best' inside," recalled John. "I know now this was utter nonsense, and as far as I'm concerned the sooner those birds are out the shed the less likely they are to develop some of the behavioural problems that can cause so much trouble later."

Obviously hens must undergo a nest box training period to reduce the incidence of floor eggs, and first letting the birds out in the late afternoon and gradually pulling this time forward would seem sensible, and should also meet the approval of the Egg

Inspector. "We like to think we use a common sense approach and we will take into account some of the practical difficulties encountered by producers," said Mr Hainsworth. Another perceived problem may be the extended day length in the summer subjecting the young hen to more hours of light than recommended in the breed manuals. "Again, it doesn't seem to be too much of a problem," said John Widdowson. "I think in a lot of cases we are only fooling ourselves and not the chickens when we try to artificially restrict the length of day during the summer months. With light seeping through ventilation shafts and songbirds in full voice outside, the pullet is probably being stimulated into egg laying regardless. By keeping her in the dark we are just restricting her ability to eat enough food to sustain this development."