

# Canada's Cruel Hatchery Industry

The Experience of One Undercover Investigator in a Canadian Hatchery



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***For a period of six months an undercover investigator worked in a large Canadian hatchery handling both chickens and turkeys. The following is his account of practices within the industry.***



Photo courtesy Mercy for Animals

Turkeys and chickens are gregarious and sensitive birds. 600 million are slaughtered each year in Canada.

The birds are incubated in machines. They are then hatched in rooms full of long steel mesh drawers. In nature, a mother hen will often communicate with her baby by cooing and rolling the eggs. Modern day factory farming where everything is done by machines is a far cry from the warmth of a mother hen.

My first job at the hatchery was in the hatch room, grabbing up the chicks that had broken out of their shells the night before and loading them into containers. Each container was sectioned off into four compartments and held 100 chicks or poults (baby turkeys). I was continually criticized for being too careful and slow with the birds. The other workers grabbed up handfuls of the birds with legs and wings jutting this way and that. I was told by one of the senior workers that everyone is the same when they start, afraid to hurt the birds, but soon realize that there's a quota to fill and if they don't get faster, they get fired.

## **Birth Defects**

Chicks born with birth defects are incredibly common. Standard operating practice at this facility was to throw them into an empty container under the table. These

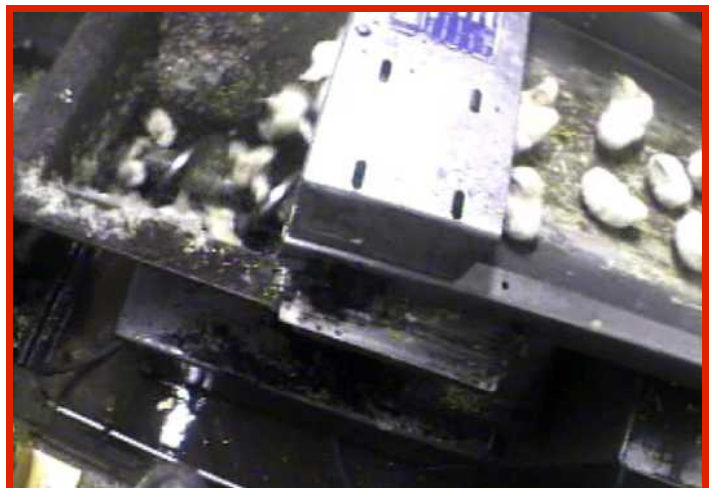
chicks were killed after we were done in the hatching room. It didn't matter that they were left to suffer.

The most common defect I saw were chicks with one or both eyes still closed, but many others were missing feathers, lame or had deformed or incorrectly placed beaks. Many birds were born underdeveloped, with their skin raw and bloody. I even saw one with its leg immobilized, grown into an unhatched egg.

Although I was horrified at what I saw and wanted to get all of the birds out, there was a little turkey born with a crooked beak that I tried to smuggle out of the hatchery. The poult was considered "garbage" and would've been ground up alive anyway. I don't know why this bird affected me so much, but I was becoming so sick of the killing I thought if I could get at least one out it would make a difference. I put this bird in my pocket and he nestled in and went to sleep. He quietly poked his head out every once in a while to see what was going on around him, but quickly went back to sleep. Toward the end of the day he woke up, and I prayed for him to be silent but a co-worker heard him chirping. She told me to give her the bird and I refused so she reached into my pocket and took him. I could've tried running with him (and now wish I had) but I knew it was useless. She broke his neck and to this day I still feel tremendous guilt over the little poult's death.

## **The Chick Grinder**

The method most hatcheries use to dispose of the chicks with defects or excess hatches (more live-births than the company has orders for) is a Chick Grinder.



Chicks being ground up alive  
Photo courtesy Mercy for Animals

The grinder is a large drum with a high-speed rotating blade in the bottom.

The chicks, both chickens and turkeys, are tossed into this grinder alive and fully conscious. The vacuum force of the grinder sucks the chicks down into the blades and hacks them to pieces.

The excess hatched chicks could be up to 3 days old, moved to the back room awaiting further orders. If the orders don't come in, the chicks are ground up alive.

**At this plant alone, at least 400 chicks were ground up alive daily.**

### Detoeing, Desnooding, Dubbing and Debeaking

All of the birds underwent numerous mutilations and invasive procedures without anaesthetics or analgesics within the first 4 hours of being born.

These were done in a separate room from the hatching. The stations were set up with conveyor belts running from machine to machine.

For the poults, the process started with toe microwaving, then a conveyor belt carried them to the sexers. The poults were thrown down separate chutes based on whether they were male or female, where they then had their beaks cut off. Sometimes they were vaccinated and sometimes they had their toes and snoods (the red wattle on a turkey) cut off. Chicks went through the same procedures but they started with the sexing, and instead of having their toes microwaved, they were burned off.

### **Microwaving**

Day old poults had the ends of their toes microwaved off. At this hatchery, the turkeys were dumped onto a conveyor belt. As they passed by, we would each grab a bird, flip them upside down, put their tiny ankles in shackles and press a button. The turkeys were pulled into the machine, their toes were microwaved off and they were dropped onto a slide where they slid down and landed on a conveyor belt to go to the next machine. Sometimes the microwave malfunctioned and burned their feet. These birds could not be used so were ground up alive.

### **Detoeing**

Detoeing was done to the chicks. The toe-burning was not done by a machine but instead by a hand-operated burner. The chicks were processed one by one. The burning device had hot blades that a worker used to sear each chick's toes off.

Some companies that purchased from the hatchery requested to have the side toes of the turkeys cut off. This was done with a pair of regular household scissors.

### **Desnooding**

Some turkeys had their snoods picked off – this was done by literally pulling them off manually. Whether this was done or not depended on the purchasing company.

While microwaving the toes and debeaking were always done on turkeys, the desnooding and cutting of the toes depended on what company they were destined for.

### **Debeaking**

All chicks and poults had partial beak amputation. Debeaking has been shown to be incredibly painful as the beaks of turkeys and chickens contain more nerve endings than our finger tips. The debeaked birds suffer phantom pain and some develop tumours of the beak as the nerve endings attempt to regenerate. Many countries now recognize the cruelty of debeaking and have banned it, but it was still being done at the hatchery where I worked.

The birds were debeaked by a machine. Workers picked them up and put them beak-first into the machine. The birds were held into the machine by their beaks. As the blade rotated, so did the chicks. When the chicks had done almost a full circle, the machine released them and the birds slid down a chute into a crate. There were different colored crates for males and females and they were kept separate.

I was told by a supervisor that in Europe they weren't allowed to do both debeaking and microwaving of toes; they could only do one or the other as the procedures were so painful. **In Canada, we have no such laws and birds will often go through microwaving, sexing, debeaking, snood cutting and toe burning all within the first four hours of being born.**



Chick being debeaked  
Photo courtesy Mercy for Animals

## Vaccinations

There were three to four vaccination stations around a round conveyor belt. When a chick went by we would pick them up, hold them by the neck and jab a needle into their back.

## Sexing

Sexing is an invasive procedure to sort males from females. This is not done to broiler chickens as they are killed so young that they do not reach sexual maturity.

Sexing is not done by regular hatchery workers – these are specially trained people that come in specifically to do the sexing. Since the sex organs of the birds are internal, the “sexers” squeeze the bird to find out what sex they are.

**Management told us sexing did not hurt the birds, but so many of the chicks vomitted from the squeezing that the sexers had to have a cannister in front of them to catch the vomit, which was green in color.**



Chicks being sexed  
Courtesy Mercy for Animals



Chicks falling off conveyor belt  
Courtesy Mercy for Animals

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*Although it has been over two years since I left the hatchery, the experience continues to haunt me.*

*What I remember most is this:*

- *Chicks peeping in vain for their mothers, trying to find the warmth and comfort they would never know in their lifetime;*
- *Workers taught to view birds as products and those who could not be used, as “garbage”; and*
- *The look of curiosity and confusion on the faces of the millions of birds I saw while knowing that the future did not hold anything good for them.*

*These birds are born in factories, sentenced to lives in dark, windowless sheds and forced to die slow, painful deaths at slaughterhouses that use electrified stun baths which have been shown to not actually stun the birds, but rather immobilize them as their necks are sliced with a spinning blade.*

*I believe that once we are educated about something it becomes our responsibility to act.*

***Please, don't support industries that treat animals this way. Boycott large agricultural companies and demand higher standards. We may not be able to stop these industries but we can make life better for the animals who are unfortunately born into it.***

*We have a choice and freedom in the way we chose to live, but the animals that are born, live and die because of our eating habits, don't.*

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