

# Nest Box Training with Charlie Roberts

## Episode 11

### Transcription:

**Daniel:** Hello Daniel OBrien here, welcome back to [Greengrassseggfarming.com](https://greengrassseggfarming.com). My special guest today is Charlie Roberts from [CharCol Springs](https://charcol.com), welcome to the call today.

**Charlie:** Good day Daniel it's great to be aboard.

**Daniel:** Excellent, today we're gonna be talking about the Nest Box training so basically when you get new birds in, they need to learn the ropes of what to do, what not to do and how we go through that training process so you have a successful outcome. You've minimize ground eggs, it just got a smooth transition for them to use the system effectively but in your words, do want to describe what is nest box training?

**Charlie:** Nest box training is where we buy in birds point of lay, they take weeks before they start laying eggs, approximately around that age and they've never been off the ground coming from hatcheries so one, we have to teach them how to perch and then secondly how to lay eggs in the nest box.

**Daniel:** Ok so they've been on the ground because like on their growing sheds in the hatchery they just pretty belong like a sawdust floor, a day old chicken doesn't roost so basically they just put them in from day old up to 18 weeks in a big bun. So explain to me, tell me how the birds arrive and what happens when the truck drives on the driveway to like those first 12 or 24 hours, what you do there?

**Charlie:** Primarily when the truck arrives, the first one is perch training and second one is to get them used to the trailer so when the truck arrives with these cages, we put the hens straight into the trailer from the cages, close the trailer down and we'll leave them in the trailer for about an hour to two hours, once we take the trailer out to the paddock where we gonna set them up in the cell.

We make sure that it's cool enough, we'll leave them in there for about two hours and then we'll open the trailer up and let them out so they know that that's their base and that's their home, they'll go out and fossick around and graze around for an hour or two and they will come back when it's dark and then walk around the trailer to keep them moving so they'll actually hop back into the trailer if you keep them moving, you have to pick up three or four maybe six hens and put them into the trailer that first night and then they all perched up for that night.

Birds have habits so if you can teach them, first time show them, second time we'll observe and third time now pick it up. Once they'd picked it up, they'll continue to keep doing that and that goes into the nest box, they will lay eggs into the nest box as well.

**Daniel:** So when you're walking around, you're walking around because they'll likely too wanna sit down in the grass and sit their for the night oppose to going in the trailer?

**Charlie:** That's correct Daniel, they'll do what they normally do in the shed, they actually swarm almost like a swarm of bees that huddle together on the ground. If you keep walking and moving through the birds it's stop them from doing that and a couple of few hop up into the trailer the rest will observe and then they'll start to figure out "Oh look, that's where we gonna go" and they'll hop up into the perches for the night. By keeping them moving and it will keep them active and observing what's going on with the other birds.

**Daniel:** Ok, so how long would you be walking around for, is that something that's 10 minutes of four hours? What sort of time frame?

**Charlie:** No, even 20 minutes to half an hour, just on dark. Normally when your birds are coming into roost it's not a long exercise. A general rule of thumb is two beers.

**Daniel:** Ok I'll note that down, two beers. So that's the first night, so after they'll all in, do you close down the shed that night or you leave that open? What do you do that first night?

**Charlie:** We have in the past, to do that you have to be back at daybreak to open the trailer up again to let them out. At the moment we are having luck without closing the doors down. We do use the lights, we run a light system in our trailers for the early days in the morning, we actually turn those lights on which assist can go into that trailer that first night, right during the trailer you flick the lights off and they all have their days, next morning they'll hop out, the following nights you repeat the same process, you find by the third night, you'll have all but one of your birds in the trailer.

**Daniel:** Ok and then by fourth night you don't even need to go out there?

**Charlie:** You don't ever need to go out there, don't even need to go next in your trailer.

**Daniel:** Ok so three nights, I remember when I was first starting and I've seeing all these hens, I probably wasn't walking around, I was trying to stand there and going "Why are you all in a pile?" and then I'll pick all few hundred birds and put them in and go "Oh my goodness, am I gonna have to do this for the next few years?" but that three night rule, it's true and I've heard it from so many farmers, at first night you'll go "Why don't you just go in? What's going on?" and second night maybe a quarter of them, third night it's like two, three or maybe as you said one and fourth night it's all over but I remember thinking on the first night like if someone told you "By four nights, this won't happen to you" and

not, your pulling my leg for sure. but as you said they're creatures of habit, they just follow their leader they just like "We're all cool now, we're all sorted".

**Charlie:** The rule of three is a good rule or a good guide with any work to do with the bird at all and that goes into nest boxing as well. If they lay an egg in the particular place, generally you have three lays before you have to break that habit, if you can break them in that three lays which generally is a four days, if you can break that habit on the four days for that particular bird, you'll have success.

**Daniel:** Ok so talk me through that, so now your birds that arrived, they've been there four days so they're now perching up, they're taking themselves in and out, what do you do now to train them for the nesting boxes.

**Charlie:** Depending on the time of the year, of the season, during the winter they come on the lay slower and the age of your birds when you purchase your birds, you will then observe if they're starting to lay they will squat, the birds will tell you they will squat and tip their wings out as if they're preparing for a rooster. If they're not ready to lay, they will run, you walk through your birds, if your birds are running from you they are not ready to lay if they're starting to squat and put their wings out in front of you, they are ready to start laying.

Observe your percentages on birds doing this, observe the same amount of birds, the ones that are going to start laying will also come around your legs and peck your legs and being close, the ones that are not laying will be outward. It then comes to spending approximately two hours of three hours in the morning by grabbing the birds that are starting to squat and put them into the [nesting boxes](#) and you do this once or twice, you don't have to do it on all the birds a lot of them will pick them up by watching them and observing the other birds and they will then understand where the [nesting boxes](#) are.

**Daniel:** So if you're walking through the birds and a bird squats, you'll pick her up and then carry her over and put her into a [nesting box](#).

**Charlie:** Yes, you work generally walk around the outskirts of the trailer so you don't have to walk too fast, they'll come to you when they're ready to lay, you may only have to do it 20 minutes to 30 minutes session but if the birds are not ready to lay, you can waste a lot of time and a lot of energy putting birds into the [nesting boxes](#) and they won't that.

**Daniel:** Ok, just because they squat with their wings out it doesn't mean they're about to lay an egg now, they just at the maturity where they're coming into the time to lay, is that what you referring to?

**Charlie:** That's correct, there is a whole different position and stances for a hen that's about to lay an egg. It's a good one to observe and it's really good one to understand the habits where they are going to lay an egg.

**Daniel:** Yeah, just to clarify when you are putting them in the nest box then letting them sit there for the next 20 minutes, you're just putting them in there just so they know that that's a cool place to go, is that right?

**Charlie:** Absolutely, you're showing them that there is a nook and a cranny, or a nice place to lay an egg. They will observe it and they'll hop out after a couple of minutes and if the bird comes flying out of the box, she's not ready. They will observe and come back down into the ground but they do remember, they will go back.

**Daniel:** So you've just done that a little mental thing in the chook's head like "Here is a cool spot" when you do want to lay an egg they'll be like "Ohh, I remember that" and go back there, and that's what you want to create.

**Charlie:** Absolutely, most importantly with nooks and crannies, if you have anywhere whether it be on your feeders, around your drink bowls, under your trailer an absolute perfect example. If you create a cool dark place, they will lay their eggs there so if you can minimize anywhere around your trailer whether it be under the trailer or around the feeders, your nooks and crannies, and create just the [nesting box](#) for laying, you'll have a great success.

**Daniel:** The note there, make out of anywhere the chooks can go, make the [nesting box](#) the most comfortable place and they'll go back there. If they find the more comfortable places under the trailer or behind the feeder, they'd rather lay eggs there and a good thing to remember, I remember seeing some farms, your best case scenario if you've got a movable shed, your out in a paddock with nothing, I remember a case – we're moving the fences along and the caravans and this particular cell, it was 50 by 50 meter cell, there was one tree and under that tree was an old rusted bit of increment it was probably something from the 50's like they would go behind the horse or something, maybe even earlier and it wasn't very big but I think it was like the disks on this plough, it create nice little shadows and almost like little hiding holes and the birds were just coming in and I didn't even think anything of it, I'm just like "We're moving them through in the square across the paddock" on that day there was like 60 to maybe a 160 eggs around this thing and I'm like "Ohh my goodness" exactly that they've come in and gone "This spot right here looks awesome to lay eggs".

So if you're starting and you're moving your hens through a paddock, avoid areas that might have a lot of long grass or a little galley or something where they can get in and under, I remember one farm at West of New South Wales, that a tree had fallen over and there's still a lot of foliage on it – the chooks loved it, they sort of got in there and laid eggs now with movable electric fencing, if we just went around that, no drama but at that time when you didn't know you'll like "Why have I got like a hundred eggs under this thing" and it's exactly that they stand a nook and cranny that was a little bit more comfortable than the [nesting box](#) and they like that's where we gonna lay our egg.

**Charlie:** Absolutely, even in a long grass – short grass for nest box training for pullets is the ideal, a grass up to a foot long and they now be happy to lay eggs in it. So if you

remove the nooks and crannies, we've had great success with keeping our doors completely open to create a lot of lot to stop them laying on the mesh, on the trailer which they can. We found if we close the doors down, the birds would lay on the mesh of the trailer, with the doors open completely they go straight up to the nest box.

**Daniel:** Yes and I think what people needs to remember is when the chooks are first laying, this is brand new for them like they're just learning "Ok, I lay an egg each day what do I do with this egg?" they may not want to lay on the mesh but they still learning to go "Ok, this is a dark spot I guess I'll lay it here" but as you said if that chook had been out in the nest box a couple of times she's like "Hey I don't need to lay on the mesh there's a beautiful dark, secure, safe nest box, I'll jump up there and lay my egg". Tell me under the trailer, do you screen off under your trailer so they can't get under there when they first come on the lay or how do you manage that?

**Charlie:** Absolutely, I've had a many different ideas, we've found what's work for us, we've made a skirt with shade cloth which is doubled up and it has wood perch battens the same as them down in the bottom so like a weighted rod on the ground level, we use S hooks, we made up some wire S hooks which hook up to the mesh at the bottom of the trailer, there's no way for the birds to go under the trailer only for the time that the nest boxing is on, once the nest boxing is completed and we're happy, we remove the skirt.

**Daniel:** So you're referring to the nest box training so those first few weeks, is that right?

**Charlie:** Absolutely, during the summer you do need that under the trailer for a shade area, you'll need to get the skirt off as quick as you can but don't do it too early otherwise the chooks will start laying under the trailer again.

**Daniel:** So what have you found from doing this versus not doing this so if someone's like "Ohh, should I worry about it? Is it worth doing? It sound's like a bit of effort" tell me your experience on that Charlie.

**Charlie:** We first started with 450 birds, we have 37 laying on the ground while still doing it. Now we've cut our hours down considerably, per trailer now we're down to approximately 30 hours spent on nest box training through knowledge, and we're now down to one to two birds per trailer will lay on the ground. Yes, I do recommend it highly it's worth the hours, the more hours you do on it the more observation you make the better you get assets.

Every business model is different but we have chosen not to sell of the ground, why it's because we employ labor and we cannot guarantee with our staff if they think they got off the ground, it's that one that's been out in the sun and has been there for two days to three days and we can't guarantee to our customers that this is a premium quality egg if we don't know the quality of the egg. The 30 yard hours for nest box training and to get all of your hens laying in your nest box is the optimum, that's the ultimate.

**Daniel:** I definitely agree and when you look at it, let's say 30 hens down to one hen just so people realize that's everyday so when you got "Oh, that's only 30 eggs" but that's everyday and there's 30 eggs that you either can't sell or you have to sell it in a reduced price or pay money to put them through a machine to wash them – that's everyday. If you spend the time upfront, those 30 hours and get it down to just one egg a day per trailer now you're looking – yeah it's only gonna be seven eggs a week, you cannot eat them you sell if you don't need to worry about buying a 10 thousand dollar egg washing machine.

**Charlie:** No absolutely and that makes a big difference in your margin, you still need to move the birds if they're laying an egg that you can't sell or in a reduced cost, it's still the same amount of labor and effort to produce that egg and decide to reduce price.

**Daniel:** I totally agree with you, it is worth putting in that effort and just to schedule that in when you're birds come on to know that you've got down to the hours to know that there's 30 hours spent doing that and I know Shane and Marnie Ellis from Gippsland Free Range in Victoria they say the same thing, you put that energy in the start with and make your job so much easier, not for a week or month but for the next year that they lay because suddenly they're trained, they're perching, you can move them along, it's done.

It pays off, opposed to going "Oh no, I won't worry about it" and then for the next year as we said earlier they're creatures of habit, they'll gonna go back to "Oh, where have I always lay my egg, I've laid under the trailer or neither feeder or some random spot" and then you're spending labor trying to find it and collect it, as you said wasn't in the sun, wasn't in the mud, is it even legal to sell, you don't have the traceability on it oppose to winding in the conveyor belt and have clean eggs brought there.

**Charlie:** I do know a trick, it doesn't have to be every morning, like I said birds of habits so if you really work to a couple of hours this morning, you could leave them for two days. If there were some hens laying on the ground tomorrow morning, you would get them in the next morning, you would catch those one's by observation and catch them, you observe them going to lay an egg or looking for a nook and cranny whether it be around the drink bowls or under the feeders and that's through observation, you would catch that bird as got just before she lays her eggs on the ground or in the nook and cranny and they catch here and you gonna put her on the [nesting box](#).

We found through this technique that you only have to put her in once maybe twice with that particular bid and she'll go there every time after. How we know which bird it is? Every time you put a bird, catch a bird that's about to lay an egg in a nook and cranny we put a little ring on their leg then when we go back to the trailer the following day we know if we see a bird with a ring in it's leg, we'll walk past her and we'll catch her and put her on the [nesting box](#) and that is identifies her as your ground layer and if you observe her in the [nesting box](#) laying an egg on her in accord you take the ring off and that identifies you a birds that you need to work with.

**Daniel:** Do you do that on every single flock? So in every single flock, identify the birds and put the rings on when you're putting them on the box and when you've seen them lay in the box, remove those rings?

**Charlie:** No, we only use the rings for identifying ground layers for the nest box training purposes.

**Daniel:** So what do you do, if you're picking up the same bird with a ring so many times, what happens to her?

**Charlie:** She becomes accustomed to the fact that just her job to lay an egg up in the [nesting box](#) then right at the end of your nest box training prior to saying the nest box is complete, normally when you are around your 85 or 90% you're near on full lay with your flock, you get over right on daybreak when the [nesting box](#) is open and you spend a couple of hours, it takes two mornings to complete and every bird that you see with a ring on it's leg that's in the [nesting box](#) laying an egg you take the ring off and it should work your way down to only having one bird or maybe two birds completely that have rings left on their leg.

**Daniel:** And with those two birds, do you leave them in the flock or do you remove them out of the flock?

**Charlie:** We remove them and then sell them as pullets, where you still get your premium price full.

**Daniel:** So someone can buy a hen, they'll probably gonna have it in their backyard with totally different farming system. They're getting good eggs, your selling her on so you've actually completed the whole process and now you're getting no ground eggs because you've eliminated the one or two were laying on the ground.

**Charlie:** Yes completed but you still get a random egg.

**Daniel:** Whether she just didn't make it on time or something.

**Charlie:** Yeah or she's not sure on what the pain in the bum was, you would always seem to have a random egg, It's something we believe that is a part and parcel of having hens.

**Daniel:** At that stage there's probably two type of ground eggs, you've got one which is the same chook the one with the leg band, she just for whatever reason she decided nest box is aren't for her, rain, hail or shine she's gonna lay on the ground, we've got rid of her the other type of ground egg is just it's a random chook we believe, it's a different chook each day that just didn't make it in time or decided not to go in the [nesting box](#) that day.

**Charlie:** The random egg will be identified because it won't be in the same place everytime you see it if you find it in the same place every time, you'll know that it's a particular ground layer you need to work on.

**Daniel:** So if you do find it in the same place each time, would you recommend the next day, see what hen goes there, grab her and put a leg band on to identify her and go from there?

**Charlie:** Absolutely, when you put a leg band on, you then put her up into the [nesting box](#) and she will lay that egg that she was about to lay in the [nesting box](#) and we'll only have to do that once at the absolute outside twice and that hen will go their up in the [nesting box](#) for the rest of her laying time.

**Daniel:** I think we've covered quite a bit from getting hens in from the truck arriving to getting them up to the perches. We talked about closing the trailer up for two hours, let them out to forage after that, walk around the trailer so if their swarming, clamping up so they don't get settled and they jump up into the trailer do that for one two three nights and the fourth night you can have off.

How long does that take, two beers? Then when it comes to nest box training, we screen off underneath and any birds that we see when you walk past they sort of squat down with their wings out, pick them up, put them in the nest box and if you see a hen sort of squatting to lay an egg, pick her up as well and put her in the nest box. Any that you do, pick up and put in we put leg bands on and then after they're all laying, any that are in the nest box we remove the leg bands and we shouldn't have any ground eggs, is there anything I missed out?

**Charlie:** I think you've done very well Daniel.

**Daniel:** Okay, well thank you so much for your time today Charlie. Tell me about, you ran workshops from time to time so people want to, they want to get started in free range egg farming or they've already got chooks and an egg farm and they want to learn more. Tell me quickly about the workshops that you ran on your farm there.

**Charlie:** Absolutely Daniel, we set up to do the course and getting started in pastured egg farming and the workshop is based on covering such points as the nest box training, marketing pastured eggs and how to market them as a premium product, buyer's security, paddock planning on how to plan up your farm as such and your models. It covers all the basic topics that you need and required to get you up and started and all the little tricks and things that we've learned along the way, right from packing in the shed, little tricks right through to collection on the paddocks. A very condensed one day course and it will give you everything that you need to get you started.

**Daniel:** And I wish I had access to that when I first started, I know I made heaps of mistakes and if I could just gonna do a tafe course or do a field day on someone's farm where they really doing it, it would've saved me thousands of dollars because as you probably know as well, there's little things which you just either look or you didn't know and if someone could just go and say "Hey, don't do it like that" exactly what we've shared today about nest box training, if you know that upfront and you're not picking up all the



ground eggs, over a year that can be a thousands of dollars worth. So I highly recommend anyone to get the training to get the tips to have a successful and profitable egg farm.

**Charlie:** Absolutely Daniel, our philosophy is if we can save you 20 man hours in your business at 25 dollars a man per hour, there's 500 dollars at the end of the course paid for in 20 man hours alone, and we believe we can't save you 20 man hours in a matter of 10 minutes of the course as we give them tricks and a few hard learnings from our hard learnings, yeah I wish we had something like that when we were starting.

**Daniel:** And tell me quickly, you do run these course from time to time they are at your farm, we didn't cover it in the start, tell me a bit about your farm and where you are located.

**Charlie:** We're located in the South West of Western Australia, Manjimup. We own a hundred acres and lease another 85 acre of farm and we're running two and half thousand birds at the moment with 5 trailers and also we're building up our cattle number as well, up to 30 breeders will go up to approximately 80 breeders so we're doing a lot of sustainable farming style through paddock rotations, we have grazing and sustainable farming through cattle and chook rotations.

**Daniel:** Do you have a bit of an orchard there as well?

**Charlie:** We do, we have 12 hundred fruit trees Tahitian limes and finger limes, they were go hop and growing as well.

**Daniel:** For anyone that what's to get started in egg farming, whether you've got an orchard or you got cattle or you just got land, I highly recommend you get enroll to one of the courses. If someone's flying into Perth, how far are you South of Perth Charlie?

**Charlie:** We're three hours drive South of Perth down in the Southern forest region.

**Daniel:** No worries so for more information can they just go to your website and find out when the next course is coming out.

**Charlie:** Absolutely, feel free to get our contact details off the website and give us a call.

**Daniel:** Is that charcolsprings.com.au?

**Charlie:** Yes it is, just email us and we'll get back to you with all the details.

**Daniel:** No worries, well thank you so much for your time today Charlie and I look forward to doing another podcast together of another helpful tip for everyone.

**Charlie:** Not a problem, it'll be my pleasure to share my information and knowledge.

**Daniel:** Thank You.