

Feeding guidelines for Mistral Gris

Feeding Mistral Gris is not precision science - they are robust birds and will make the best of any brooding and growout conditions they are given. But you do have to feed them enough to grow, and not seriously over feed them either.

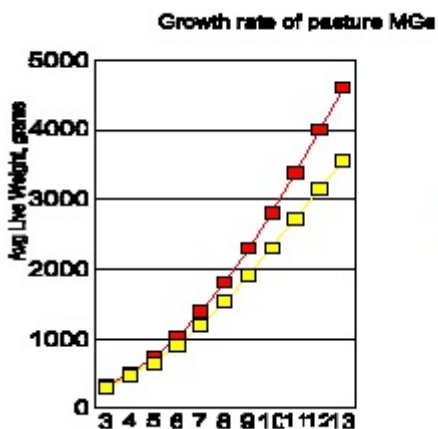
Here are some basic management tips:

Feed **free choice for up to 6 weeks**, or when they go 'off the chart' below, and then start to limit access to feed. Leaving full feeders out 24/7 is usually wasteful, can attract rats, and may discourage foraging. Most people take the food away at night. Some give the birds access to feed several times a day (eg. putting it out for 3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon). When you feed, make sure that **all of the birds in a group can feed at the same time**. That might mean providing long line feeders.

If you are raising more than 25 chicks, or putting them into tractors, **separate the boys from the girls** after about 6 weeks, The girls will do much better without the competition.

Keep the final goal in mind: Boys 4 kg at 12 weeks, Girls 3.6 kg at 12 weeks.

How do you know if their growth is on track? By comparing their weights to this chart of average weights by week:



| Age wks | Male wgt grams | Fem wgt gms |
|---------|----------------|-------------|
| 3 | 316 | 303 |
| 4 | 486 | 459 |
| 5 | 723 | 646 |
| 6 | 1017 | 894 |
| 7 | 1380 | 1194 |
| 8 | 1810 | 1538 |
| 9 | 2298 | 1914 |
| 10 | 2815 | 2301 |
| 11 | 3387 | 2718 |
| 12 | 3998 | 3147 |
| 13 | 4606 | 3556 |

Every week or two, weigh 4 or 5 birds of each sex, and compare their average weight to the chart. If they are more than 10% below, you need to feed more. If they are more than 10% high, you should feed less. It's really that simple.

You can **feed more** by giving access to feed longer, by increasing the richness of the feed, or by supplementing with a rich feed - anything with animal protein in it works very well!

You can **feed less** by reducing access to feed or by feeding a leaner feed. [You may

wonder why anyone would want to reduce the growth rate of a meat bird. The main reason is that you want to eat meat, not fat - a bird that is growing 'too fast' is putting on a lot of fat.]

What to feed.

You can start your chicks on fresh high protein **Starter** feed (no higher than 20%), but wean them over to fresh 16 or 17% **Grower** feed by 3 weeks old. (I find that one bag of Starter is just about right for 25 Mistral Gris for their first 3 weeks.) Or you can just feed them Grower from Day 1, and they will be okay.

Medicated feed contains Amprol which inhibits reproduction of Cocci parasites. If your brooder is less than sterile or the chicks will be exposed to dust from adult chickens, you might want to use medicated feed. The alternative would be to wait and see if any symptoms of Cocci appear, and if so you can put Amprol in their water. If your chicks were vaccinated at the hatchery, that vaccine is not related to Cocci and has no implications for your choice of medicated or unmedicated feed.

Feeding **Organic** feed can present problems. Chicks can be very wasteful with mash (finely ground feed). If this starts happening, you might try mixing it with a little water - just enough to clump it up a bit, not turn it to dough. The other problem is freshness - more on this below. Your MG may reject stale feed or eat less of it - something to watch.

Most **pastures** do not have a lot of **digestable forage** for chickens. They will eat grass, but they cannot digest cellulose, so it's not much food. What a foraging chicken is looking for is bugs, worms, mice, carrion, manure from other animals, and soft leaved high-protein plants. If you can plant your pasture with brassicas, legumes, amaranth, dandelions, etc. there will be more food value in it for your chickens. In the meantime, do not assume that you should cut back on their feed just because they are on pasture.

If you are preparing **your own feed mix**, be sure to test each of your main ingredients so that you know its protein and carb density, and include a poultry mineral and vitamin supplement. Store your ingredients cool and dry.

Note on freshness: Once kernels of grain are crushed or chopped their food value begins to decline. Vitamins can be lost quickly and oils will oxidize. In warm weather, processed feed should not be kept longer than 6 weeks, and even in the winter 12 weeks should be max. Store feed in moisture free insulated bins if you have to keep it a long time (like an old freezer), and supplement with extra vitamins if it is getting old. Riboflavin and Choline are the first vitamins to drop below required concentrations. Check the dates of milling on the bags or totes.

If you have **dairy** animals, you can give your MG a 'growth enhancer' by feeding them fresh or clabbered milk, or whey, occasionally. One option is to mix milk or whey with low protein feed to bring it up to 17%. Keep an eye on the weight chart and don't overdo it, because too much protein and fat is... too much! In the last week of life you can feed them lots of milk and they will 'finish' beautifully!

Environmental factors for feed and growth.

The biggest environmental factor that affects feeding requirements is **temperature** - if the birds are **cold** (all day, or just at night, or in wind & rain conditions) they will 'spend' more carbs on keeping warm, and have less for growth. Mistral Gris can be quite comfortable in cold weather, but they need to eat more food. Providing a cozy, dry area for them to retreat to will save you money on your feed bill.

Being too **hot** has it's problems as well. In hot weather they will drink more water and process their food faster and less efficiently. A panting chicken is not growing. They should always have access to shade, and not have to crowd together to get into that shade. In the hottest weather I set up a lawn sprinkler in their pasture - pleasant cooling for them, and it does the pasture good, too.

Chickens like dry, not wet. If they are indoors, make sure their litter is dry. Wet litter will generate ammonia, which is hard on their eyes and lungs, and will reduce their growth rate. Outdoor Gris are fine running around in the rain or through wet grass, but they should always have a dry place to rest and warm up in.

Their **activity** level can have a big effect on the amount of food they need. If they are running around a lot, they will be leaner and consume more food. These birds do not need special training to keep them moving - they can even overdo it. If your birds are more than 10% below the chart at 10 weeks old, you may have to confine them for the last 2 weeks to bring them in at target weight.

Lastly, Mistral Gris are pretty calm, relaxed birds, but if you are reading this for pointers on raising Grazers, SASSOs, etc. pay attention to whether your birds are anxious or are getting disturbed frequently. Stress reduces growth rate. Coops designed to provide security, low stocking density in enclosed tractors, and making sure the birds are not bullying each other will reduce **stress**. Specifically: big size differences in the group creates stress for the smaller birds, females do better if they don't have to put up with males (sorry, guys!), exposure to too much sky overhead keeps them on alert instead of relaxed (they are creatures of the forest floor, not the plains), being stalked by predators or exposed to family pets and noisy children can be nerve wracking for some birds even if 'the bad guys' never score a hit,

I know this would all be simpler if I would just tell you, "If it's week X give them Y amount of feed per day", but I've learned that those formulas just won't be right in most small farm settings. To get the best outcome from your birds - *raised your way* - compare your birds' average weight to the chart, adjust your feeding if necessary, and use your 'chicken intuition' to sense how healthy and happy they are.

HEALTH ALERT! Last year I received a number of calls from people raising MGs who noticed toe curling and lameness starting at about 2 weeks old. When they sent some of the affected chicks in to the Animal Health Centre the vets diagnosed the problem as Riboflavin deficiency. The pattern of these affected flocks suggests that some grain mills have received vitamin/mineral packs that were lacking Riboflavin. If your chicks develop curled toes, immediately give them a vitamin supplement (like Poul-Vite) and see if that cures it. If it doesn't, send some affected chicks in to the Animal Health Centre for a reliable diagnosis.

Processing

Raising the birds perfectly isn't all you need to do. Make sure that your processor is willing to do coloured birds. Before you pack the birds up for processing, check a few to see if they have pin feathers. At 12 weeks old they shouldn't, but if you are processing younger they might.

Removing black and white feathers takes very little more time and attention than doing the white broilers, especially if the crew is competent - don't agree to pay a big premium over the price of processing white broilers. If the processor wants to charge you a 'go away' price it may mean that his crew isn't very good, so find someone else.

Remember that **Mistral Gris are not 'broilers'** and should not be 'signed in' at the processors as such. 'Broiler' is a key word for the Marketing Boards and the CFIA that can trigger enforcement of non-quota limits and the like. Say the MGs are 'heritage meat birds', and you can identify True North Heritage Hatchery as your source of chicks.

Mistral Gris benefit from a 2 day 'rest' period after processing. Rigour mortis will set in, usually a few hours after processing, and it needs to resolve before you freeze the birds. The birds can be kept in a fridge, in their bags, while this happens. It would also work to 'rest' them after they come out of the freezer, but if you have sold the bird frozen the buyer may not do that and will think your birds are tough. A well rested bird's joints are loose; the legs are floppy. Wait for it.