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How not to be at your chicken's beck and call

By *Dusty Downey*

Being away from home has become a way of life for my wife and me. As community naturalists for Audubon, we often travel the state extensively and spend a fair amount of time away from home.

We wanted to have farm-fresh eggs and raise our own poultry but that just did not seem feasible given our travel obligations until we installed an automatic chicken door.

With an automatic chicken door, if we have to spend a night away from home or we hear the bark of a coyote outside our chicken coop at 2 in the morning, we don't feel the all-too-familiar "Did we close the coop?" moment of panic. Automatic chicken doors capitalize on the chicken's reliable internal clock. Chickens are very punctual about when they leave the coop and when they roost before the door closes at sunset.

Installing an automatic door on an existing coop is a fun and easy project that can be completed within a couple of hours. This added security will allow you to sleep in, stay out late and decide when the door opens and closes.

Here are step-by-step instructions to install an automatic chicken door:

1. Order the motor and make sure the coop has a power supply. Another alternative is using a battery pack and solar panel. An Internet search for automatic chicken coop motors and solar power sources will give plenty of results. I purchased the D-20 model motor found at <http://www.add-a-motor.com>. This site also carries solar power units. Motors can range from \$40 used on eBay to \$100 new.

2. Once you have the motor and power supply, you must assess the coop's opening. Your coop will need a small hole either in the main door or wherever you would like the chickens to exit. You may need to cut an opening large enough for your chickens to get through. A hole about 12 inches x 12 inches is usually sufficient.

3. Next, create the frame and rails on the inside of the coop for the door to slide up and down in.

4. Start by cutting two 2 x 4s about 14 inches long. These are the side guides or rails. I used a table saw on its lowest setting to remove about 1/4 inch of wood along the outer edges of both sides of the frame. This can also be done with a rabbit bit on a router. This will allow the door to slide up and down while being held in place by the rails. As always, follow the safety instructions that accompany power tools.

Now it's time to make the plywood door. The plywood door needs to be just a bit larger than the original hole, so 13 inches by 13 inches should work. The door should be made of plywood or other strong, but lightweight, material and should just fit between the two rails with about 1/4-inch gap on either side so the door can move up and down without sticking. Once sure of proper movement, attach the side rails to the coop.

5. Mount the bracket for the chicken coop door opener. According to

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installation instructions, this bracket should be mounted the height of the door plus 10 inches above the door.

Install the sealing washer. Attach to the center of the door a little below the top. This holds the cable that raises and lowers the door.

6. Install the motor according to instructions and set the door travel distance according to the door size and lift according to the manual.

7. Attach the timer in a convenient location inside the coop and set when you want the door to open and close (generally at sunrise and half an hour before sunset.) It is also important to check your local sunrise and sunset times periodically throughout the year and set times as necessary to ensure your door opens at sunrise and closes a half an hour before sunset. Lastly, test the operation to ensure proper function.

Periodically check to make sure the door is working well and isn't hindered by snow or ice in the winter. You can relax, and your chickens can enjoy their new door.

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