

Management Requirements for Waterfowl

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Best Breeds To Raise: The breed of waterfowl you raise depends on your reason for raising them. First, which is best to raise--ducks or geese? Ducks are small and require less space to raise. However, ducks require a grain supplement year round and are more prone to predators. Geese require twice as much space. However, geese do well on limited grain when they have plenty of area to graze and are seldom bothered by predators.

If you wish to raise waterfowl for meat, they can be purchased from a commercial hatchery or local feed store. Muscovy, Pekin and Commercial (Barnyard) Rouens are the best breeds of duck for meat production. Emden, African and Pilgrim geese are the most common breeds of geese raised for meat. Chinese geese are commonly raised as weeder geese and watch geese because of their loud, harsh call when they are startled or frightened. If you wish to raise waterfowl for pets or as a hobby, there are 14 breeds of domestic ducks and 11 breeds of domestic geese which cover a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. There are also a variety of wild, exotic waterfowl raised in captivity. However, wild waterfowl usually require special facilities and attention as well as special permits.

When To Purchase Stock: Young waterfowl are usually only available during April, May, June and July. Adult birds can usually be purchased from breeders year round.

Brooding Waterfowl: Waterfowl can be started much like chickens. However, some special precautions should be taken. It is extremely important that you don't brood waterfowl on slippery surfaces, like newspaper, to prevent spraddled legs. Paper towels, a cloth or burlap will give the best traction. Don't raise small breeds of waterfowl on mesh wire. Many small waterfowl will get their hocks stuck in the mesh wire when they sit down to rest. Larger breeds of waterfowl can be raised on small mesh wire (approximately 3/8"). DO NOT let young waterfowl swim or become excessively wet for the first four weeks. Young birds that become wet will chill easily, tend to crowd and flip onto their backs, resulting in death.

Litter: DO NOT use litters which mold or compact when they get wet. DO NOT use fine litter until the waterfowl learn to distinguish it from feed. Otherwise, excessive litter consumption can cause death. Any absorbent material like chopped peanut hulls, pine shavings or straw can be used.

Feed: DO NOT feed medicated chicken or other poultry feeds to young waterfowl to avoid possible adverse reaction to some poultry medications. Use starter mash formulated for waterfowl if possible. Pelleted feeds are usually best as waterfowl tend to waste feed, especially when it is finely ground into mash. Feed a 20-22% protein starter ration during the first 3 weeks and then change to a 16% protein grower feed. To prevent digestive problems, feed some grit one week before allowing access to green fibrous plants. After 8 to 12 weeks of age, geese and ducks will eat very limited supplemental grain. Most people only feed a whole corn and oats mixture of about 40% corn and 60% oats until breeding

season. A 15% protein breeder diet is all that waterfowl require.

Feeders: Place lip of feeder at the back height of the bird to prevent feed wastage. Allow 6 linear inches of feeder space per bird and place feeders as far as possible from waterers.

Waterers: Provide plenty of fresh water at all times. Water is essential to keep waterfowl growing and healthy. To help keep the pen dry, place lip of the waterer at back height. In adult birds, it is good to give them a waterer deep enough for them to get their head under water beyond their eyes. To help ensure successful mating, it is good to have water available so the waterfowl can swim, especially larger breeds. An old water heater tank cut in half works well.

Lights: Waterfowl don't require light unless you wish to bring them into egg production early. If off season production is desired, use the same lighting methods used for chickens.

Nests: Supply one 12" to 18" nest for every four ducks. However, many geese and wild ducks like private nests, so plan appropriately. A barrel or bucket open on one end makes a great nest. Block the sides of the barrel so it can't roll. Waterfowl like to cover their eggs so supply plenty of fresh straw in the nest.

When To Slaughter: Ducks are usually slaughtered at 7 to 8 weeks of age or when they weigh about 4 pounds. Young geese can be slaughtered at 6 to 12 pounds (15 to 20 weeks of age). Waterfowl are usually harder to pick than chickens, but they can be easier if done at the right time. Catch a few birds a week before you plan to slaughter and pull out a tail feather and a few breast feathers. If the shafts show signs of blood or are very soft and flexible at the end, wait another 7 to 10 days before slaughter. Feathers with hard tips, which are easy to remove, indicate that the birds should be slaughtered as soon as possible for easy picking.

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