

WATERFOWL CARE: DUCKS AND GEESE

Physiology of Ducks and Geese

The average lifespan for domestic ducks bred for meat production is between six and eight years, with smaller breeds living between eight and 10 years. The average lifespan for geese is 18 to 25 years.

Ducks are currently being bred to grow much larger and at a faster rate than in the past, but geese have been manipulated far less than ducks. Though weight varies by breed, in general, mature female geese weigh between 10 and 18 pounds, and mature male geese (“ganders”) weigh between 15 and 25 pounds. Mature female ducks used for meat production, including Muscovy and Pekin, weigh between seven and 15 pounds, and mature male ducks (“drakes”) of the same breeds weigh between nine and 18 pounds. Smaller breeds of ducks, used for eggs, weigh between two and six pounds. These include breeds such as Khaki Campbell, Silver Appleyard, and Runner. Normal body temperature for ducks and geese is 107.5 °F, with young birds ranging between 102 °F and 106 °F.

Nutritional Needs of Ducks and Geese

Water. Clean, fresh drinking water must be available at all times. The use of a poultry fountain is recommended to prevent spilling. If you are using a poultry fountain make sure they have access to a pond or pool so that the waterfowl can clean their nostrils or nares. In warmer weather, check water often throughout the day. During periods of freezing temperatures, the use of a water heater is recommended. You can also use a heated bucket, but make sure it is installed properly and cords are attached to a wall so ducks do not get caught up in them. Ducks and geese splash out a good deal of water, so watch for ice build-up around the water units in the winter.

Feed. We highly recommend buying duck feed in pelleted form. There are a variety of feeds available, including some organic feeds, which provide a complete diet for waterfowl. Always use non-medicated feed because many common drug additives can be fatal to waterfowl. Avoid commercial diets formulated to promote fast growth in waterfowl used for meat or egg production. These diets, which often contain medications meant to prevent communicable diseases in large duck communities, may be harmful to your duck. Feed should be supplemented with chopped vegetables, scratch grains, and access to pasture.

Feeders. Choose a container that is heavy enough to prevent tipping and small enough to prevent your birds from walking or standing in their feed as this can lead to contamination by feces. Ducks and geese sometimes like to get their food wet, so always discard old feed and supply fresh daily.

Handling Ducks and Geese

Herd ducks into a small pen to minimize excessive chasing and try to guide the birds into a corner. When picking up a duck or goose, firmly put your hands around the wings to

control flapping. When handling a goose, hold him or her against your body with one arm to control the wings and use the other hand to control the neck so that the goose cannot reach around and bite you. Allow the bird to calm down during restraint before starting any treatments or health checks. To prevent injury to you or the bird, ask an experienced handler to demonstrate proper technique and to supervise you as you practice.

Shelter Requirements for Ducks and Geese

Building. A shed makes a fine home for ducks or geese. The shelter must be predator-proof and well ventilated. Plenty of clean, dry straw should always be provided for bedding, and wet and soiled bedding should be removed daily. We recommend cleaning the entire building (i.e., scrubbing floors, walls, etc.) once a week. An unopened straw bale makes a terrific roost for ducks and geese and is a good way to keep them off the ground when sleeping. For protection from predators, your birds must be kept safely in their shelter at night.

Pond. Ducks and geese need water in which to bathe and swim. This is necessary for both their health and their happiness. If you don't have a pond or small lake that you can fence in, a large tub or a pool will work. These vessels will probably need to be dumped, cleaned, and refilled daily. If you use a horse or cattle water tub, you will need to build a small ramp to help your birds get in and out of the water. Some waterfowl, especially those with special needs, may require rocks or other items to stand on to get out of a tub. If you have a natural spring or stream on your property, you can build a pond.

If you live in an area with freezing temperatures, you will need to close off the pond in the winter to prevent the ducks and geese from getting stuck under large sections of ice. Aeration systems can be added to small ponds to prevent freezing, but these can be expensive.

Fencing. Fencing is necessary to keep predators out and ducks and geese in. A 4- to 5-foot-high, 2-inch \times 4-inch woven wire, "no climb" fence is recommended. For areas with foxes or other digging predators, we recommend using a fence that is taller than needed to contain the birds so that the excess inches can be bent and buried to prevent predators from digging. Alternatively, you can dig a trench and sink the fence. No fence, however, is completely predator-proof.

Health Care and Maintenance of Ducks and Geese

Maintenance. For waterfowl, as for all animals, regular health checks that allow you to see each bird individually are imperative. Because waterfowl feathers are thick and therefore tend to hide injuries, it is important to examine the birds' bodies often. During your daily contact with your birds, always be on the lookout for any physical or behavioral changes. In particular, watch for dirty vent areas, changes in behavior, separating from the flock, and limping. It can be difficult to find a veterinarian who is willing to treat ducks and geese, but they do exist. Your best bet is to find someone who works with "exotic" birds and other non-traditional companion animals.

Common Health Issues of Ducks and Geese

Worms. Although internal and external parasites are rarely a problem in small flocks of ducks and geese, we recommend having a fecal sample analyzed by a lab one to two times annually and whenever you introduce a new bird to your flock. We recommend that you obtain two clean fecal results before you put a new bird in with your residents. If parasites are detected, you will need to administer a worming medication. Wormers can be purchased at farm supply stores in easy-to-use formulas that are added to the birds' drinking water. Always check to make sure that medications are made for ducks and geese because many drugs are life-threatening to waterfowl. If you are using a water treatment, remember that this must be the only source of drinking water. Therefore, if you have a pond, the birds must not have access during treatment. Loss of weight and greatly increased feed consumption are signs of worm infestations.

Arthritis. One of the only serious health issues we see in waterfowl is arthritis, which affects geese, especially in their teens. Meat-breed ducks develop arthritis much earlier in life, and even some of the smaller duck breeds are known to get arthritis when they are still quite young.

The use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) is recommended to manage pain and swelling from arthritis, but because ducks and geese are often so averse to handling, NSAIDs may not be a good option. If you have to chase a bird to treat her for leg issues, the treatment may not be effective, and you may actually cause more harm. A pond or large swimming area is beneficial for birds with severe arthritis. If using NSAIDS is the only option to keep your bird comfortable, you may want to enclose them in a smaller area overnight so that you can treat them first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening, thereby minimizing their stress.

Bumblefoot. Bumblefoot in waterfowl is usually more of a pressure sore with less infection than you would see in other birds such as chickens. Thick bedding and access to water help relieve pressure on the feet. If you have birds with bumblefoot, there are many treatment options available but a veterinarian should determine the best course based on the specific type of condition (infection or pressure, for example).

Keel Sores. Sores are often found on the keels (breastbones) of ducks and geese, especially among those who spend more time lying down due to arthritis or other ailments. Keel sores are difficult to see without going through the feathers on the chest, which can be done only when handling the bird. This is one reason why performing individual checks is so important. These sores can become quite large and infected, and they can lead to osteomyelitis of the keel bone. Treatment with antibiotics is often necessary to clear up this type of infection. If an infection is caught late, antibiotic therapy and even surgery may be necessary.

Respiratory Infections. Respiratory infections are usually indicated by nasal discharge, lethargy, and loss of appetite. If you notice any of these symptoms, contact your veterinarian for treatment. Some antibiotics are toxic to waterfowl, so always seek guidance from a vet who works with birds before administering any medications to your ducks or geese.

Incoming Duck and Goose Procedures

- When you first get a new ducks or geese, you should isolate them from the rest of your flock and even from the same pasture used by your resident birds. Have a fecal sample sent in for analysis to ensure that your new birds are not full of parasites. Many treatments are toxic to waterfowl, so check with your veterinarian before starting any worming treatment.
- Wear isolation gear, which includes boot covers, gloves, and coveralls or some type of protective clothing so that you do not spread parasites or other disease to your resident flocks.
- Do full body checks on your new residents to ensure that they do not have any wounds, lumps or bumps, swelling in feet or leg joints, or soiled feathers around their vents.
- Make sure you birds are healthy and parasite-free before allowing them to comingle with your existing flock.

Resources for Care of Ducks and Geese

Please note: Many of the catalogs listed contain products commonly used in animal agriculture. Unfortunately, there are no farm catalogs that list only cruelty-free items.
Omaha Vaccine Company: PO Box 7228, Omaha, NE 68107; phone: 800-367-4444
Nasco Farm & Ranch: 901 Janesville Ave., Fort Atkinson, WI 53538-0901; phone: 800-558-9595
Valley Vet Supply: PO Box 504, Marysville, KS 66508; phone: 800-468-0059