

STARTING TO KEEP DOMESTIC DUCKS

INFORMATION SHEET

Ducks are delightful birds and can give their owners much pleasure and enjoyment and will provide eggs and, if wished, meat. They are hardy and suffer from far fewer serious diseases than other poultry. They are also very easy to keep, providing that a few basic facts are kept in mind. The birds' requirements for housing, food and water and enclosure are dealt with briefly here, although there are many books available which go into greater detail.



HOUSING

Housing made especially for hens is not suitable for ducks without modification, but simple, homemade housing can do very well as long as certain considerations are taken into account. These are space per bird, type of floor, bedding, ventilation and access. Housing must also keep birds safe from predators such as foxes and rats.

Large breeds need a minimum of $\frac{1}{2}$ m² floor space per bird in the duck house. The floor should be rat and fox proof. A solid concrete or paving slab floor is good as long as plenty of bedding is provided for warmth. This floor can be washed and disinfected easily. Temporary or portable housing can be set onto a small gauge

wire-netting buried slightly under the ground. Walls should generally be of wood, either exterior ply or tongue and groove boards. The roof should be of wood covered with roofing felt and have a reasonable overhang to take rain water away from the walls. The wood should be treated with preservative well before installing the ducks. Never let the birds come into contact with fresh creosote.

Bedding can be a variety of materials. Dry straw is probably the best material. Avoid damp or musty straw and hay, as fungal spores can cause lung diseases such as *Aspergillosis*. Bedding soon becomes trampled and mucky, so regular cleaning out is necessary. They should also have clean straw on which to lay their eggs.

Domestic ducks do not readily use nesting boxes or perches, except the Muscovy, so eggs will have to be collected from the duck house floor. The door must be large enough to give easy access or, for a low duck house, the roof can be hinged. The door should be at least 60cm wide, as ducks tend to stampede out in a bunch when let out in the morning. Wait until they have laid, because they do not return to the house as hens do; around 8am is the usual release time. A low door threshold helps to keep the bedding in the house, but it must not be too high to cause leg or foot injuries, to which ducks are prone. The door should fit well and be fastened securely and open away from the prevailing wind. Ventilation can be provided by a wire grille or series of small holes bored above the birds' head



height on a sheltered wall. Ducks should always be shut in before dark, although foxes may sometimes take birds in daylight.

FENCING

Fence in your ducks as well as you can afford but remember a fox is a very determined animal. Unless you put up fencing that is at least 6 feet high there is a danger that he will get in. It does not have to be too rigid; in fact, loose floppy wire netting or electric fencing can be very effective deterrents. Call ducks and bantams will be capable of flying – other breeds are unlikely to fly over even quite low fencing.

FEEDING

Ducks are excellent foragers and will find a lot of their own food if they are given plenty of range, particularly in the summer months. They are very good at eating slugs and snails. It is advisable, however, to supplement this with morning and afternoon feeds. The morning feed should be layers pellets (mash is not suitable for duck bills and is therefore largely spilled and wasted) fed in a shallow bowl or trough when the birds are let out. Wheat, barley or mixed corn can be fed in the afternoon or early evening according to the time of year. This feed should be at least half an hour before dark. As a guide to quantity, a duck of one of the large breeds such as Silver Appleyard may need up to 200g of dry food a day. The only accurate way is to judge from the birds' behaviour. If food is left after an hour you are giving too much. This is not only uneconomical but will attract flocks of wild birds and vermin, both of which can introduce diseases. If you give the afternoon feed of grain in a bowl or trough of clean water this will please the ducks and foil the sparrows.



Ducks running on grass will not need extra green stuff but during the winter it helps general good health if you give your birds fresh greens several times a week. Soft leaf greens such as lettuce can be fed whole but tough greens like outer leaves of cabbage (often discarded by the greengrocer) are easier to eat if chopped and fed with water. Grit aids digestion and should be supplied in a separate container. Oyster shell is helpful in providing extra calcium for the production of strong egg shells, but may not be necessary if layers pellets are used. All the above information also applies to young ducks, but they should be fed on a growers pellet up to the age of 18 weeks.

Ducks naturally enjoy swimming but this does not mean that you cannot keep them if you do not have a pond or a stream. They need to be able to wash their eyes and nostrils and give themselves a splash-wash in order to keep their plumage in good condition. Still water should be changed as often as possible.

A small fibreglass garden pond could be used but be sure to provide a submerged ramp or stone to help your ducks out of the water as the sides will be too slippery for their feet to grip. A good alternative is a PVC replacement wheelbarrow body. The sloping end gives easy access and it is deep enough for a good splash. It is also not too heavy for you to lift and empty. If you surround this 'bath' with concrete or paving slabs it will prevent the adjacent ground becoming excessively muddy due to trampling and rooting. A daily bath is particularly important in the winter, as the feathers must be in top condition to insulate the birds' bodies

against the cold.

ENCLOSURE

Ducks should not be kept in small pens. Their webbed feet and watery way of life will quickly turn a small pen into a stinking, disease-riddled swamp. Ideally ducks should have as much space as possible, a minimum of 10m² for small ducks and double that for larger breeds. This should be a grassy enclosure which can be rested periodically while the ducks move on to an alternative pen. This also helps prevent build-up of parasites in the soil.



Before putting birds into a new enclosure, remove sharp objects such as glass, flint, wire etc which could injure feet. If the grass is short initially the ducks will keep it short except for tough seed-bearing stalks. Shade must be provided as ducks can suffer badly in very hot weather. Spreading shrubs give shade and look attractive, or you could build an awning.

Ducks' legs are set far back on their bodies, designed as they are for life on water but this makes them clumsy on land and prone to leg injuries. Uneven ground can be hazardous for the heavy breeds such as the Aylesbury or the Rouen but lighter breeds such as Indian Runners cope well with most terrains.

Ducks should never be made to panic, so children and pets should be encouraged to move slowly and quietly when near them. Well cared-for ducks are normally quite healthy and can live for many years. They become very tame and are often regarded as members of the family.



BREEDING



Duck eggs hatch quite well in an incubator or under a broody hen. Domestic ducks, apart from Muscovies, do not usually make good mothers, although there can be exceptions (See above!) Breeding pens should be set up at least two weeks before saving eggs for hatching. As sperms may be stored by the female, any ducklings resulting from eggs set before two weeks may have been fathered by any drake available! The beginner must realise that, on average, half the ducklings hatched will be drakes and there may not be a demand for these, except for the table! In addition, few of the ducklings are likely to turn

out to be show quality or even as good as their parents. It is important to consider how to tackle this, before hatching large numbers of ducklings.

This leaflet is only a brief introduction and the successful husbandry of all livestock depends on being well informed about them. The BWA Bookshop sells a number of specialist publications which cover all aspects of keeping both Wildfowl and Domestic Waterfowl. All new keepers are strongly advised to obtain a book appropriate to their interest.

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