

KEEPING WILDFOWL - GEESE

INFORMATION SHEET

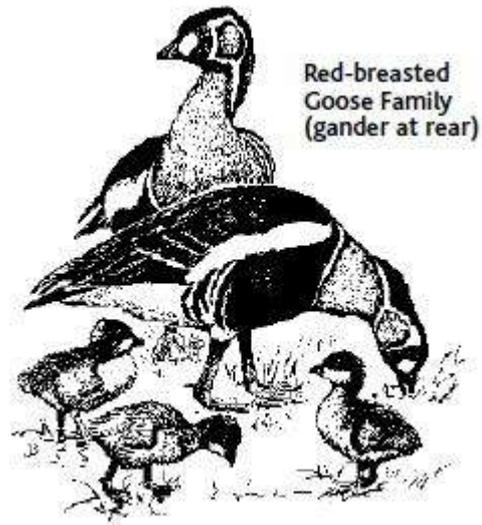
It is recommended that as well as reading this sheet you also read the BWA information leaflet "Starting To Keep Wildfowl".

GENERAL POINTS

All geese originate from the Northern Hemisphere. Known as "true geese" to distinguish them from the 'look a like' Sheldgeese of the Southern Hemisphere, they can be divided into two groups;

1. Grey Geese, all in the genus *Anser*, such as the Greylag, Bean, Pinkfoot, White-front, Snow, Ross, Emperor, and Barhead;
2. Black Geese, whose generic name is *Branta* and include Canada, Brent, Barnacle, Red-breasted, and Ne-ne. Grey geese are easy to distinguish because of their coloured feet and bills. The black geese group all have black feet and black bills.

The two groups make up a total of fifteen full species plus a variable number of subspecies, according to which authority you consult.



Red-breasted
Goose Family
(gander at rear)

BEHAVIOUR

In the wild, geese are gregarious, particularly so out of the breeding season, on migration and on their wintering grounds. In captivity a single pair of most species will thrive and breed. If space and other factors permit it may be more natural to keep more than one pair of the same species or different species. Ornamental ducks and geese may be kept together, usually without difficulty. Sheldgeese and some Shelducks are less likely to mix successfully unless your enclosure is very large, one hectare or more (two or three acres)! Swans are probably better kept on their own, or with a few ducks. "White Snow Geese and White Swans do not a happy enclosure make."

ENCLOSURE AREA

Barring the exceptions mentioned above, flocks of geese of the same species, or mixed, can be run together. The area that you have for grazing and the water area will dictate the maximum number you can keep. Assuming extra feeding, in addition to grazing particularly in winter, a rough guide is ten pairs per acre. If you want all pairs to breed and rear their own young then reduce the number of geese that you keep.

ENCLOSURE FENCING

For the sake of the geese, and your sleep, it is essential to have a 2 metre high (6' – 8') fox proof fence. Details are given in the BWA information leaflet "Starting To Keep Wildfowl".

BREEDING

Geese bond for life. While the sexes look identical they can breed in captivity in their third year. Unlike most ducks, both parents rear the young. Only the female incubates, but the gander plays a vital role in nest site and family protection. All true geese need a pond.

Almost all species display and copulate on water. A pond of sufficient depth, say 50cms (18"), and an area for two birds to bathe and turn over on their sides at once is a minimum requirement for a contented pair of captive geese. For ease of maintenance the pond should have flowing water or be easily drained and cleaned.

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NEST SITES

Geese will choose islands, piles of logs, rocks, even willow wigwams to build their nests. And, when at their most infuriating they'll nest alongside or even in the middle of a footpath! Given that, you should note that if a pair of geese incubate and rear their own young, they are likely to re-use the same place year after year. Generally pairs of geese will tend to choose some cover on a slightly elevated site, 'with a view'. There needs to be space for the gander to loaf and keep vigil nearby. They don't necessarily nest alongside their pond, and if you have more than one pair, it may be a good management to dissuade them from doing so. The dominant gander is likely to keep others from the water and reduce copulating activity.

FEEDING

Geese are vegetarians and graze short herbs, grasses and clovers. A few species with big bills such as Greylags and Greater Snow Geese may dig, looking for roots and tubers. Those with very short bills such as Ross, Redbreasted and Lesser White-front prefer sward, or will create one in time, something akin to a bowling green. These are points to bear in mind in the planting and maintenance of enclosures. Up to a point judicious hand mowing can be used to manipulate the spread of different species in a given area.

In addition to their own grazing, geese should be given wheat and poultry layer pellets, with 15% protein, twice a day. It is recommended that each pair should be given individual feed containers. This keeps the food clean, helps ensure a reasonable share for each pair and reduces the parasites such as gizzard worm. From February to the end of the laying season a higher protein pellet (18% max) may be given to enhance egg production.

Grit, both in quartz and limestone form (or oyster shell) should be available for food breakdown and digestion and eggshell production. Grit for waterfowl should be in smaller particles than that provided for domestic poultry.

ARTIFICIAL INCUBATION AND REARING

Handrearing can be a practical, if time consuming, solution to frustrate predators such as magpies, crows and gulls. By allowing the breeding pairs to recycle and lay replacement clutches, it is likely that the total number that will be reared will be increased. It is unwise to attempt three or more clutches a year from any pair.

Broody hens and incubators, or both in combination, can work well. Remember a broody hen not only incubates, but also fosters and rears. For rearing small numbers of birds you cannot better a good broody hen. All young geese need access to grass and chick crumb 24 hours after hatching. Confinement in a small brooder on a lawn with a broody hen usually ensures this. Parent geese with goslings can miss finding artificial foods or wild birds take it first.

Having sung the praises of good broody hens, there are many pairs of captive geese who gain experience over successive years and do an excellent job in rearing their own young. It is more natural and there should be no misguided goslings that believe their parents are chickens.

SUMMARY

The initial expenditure of pond digging, water supply and fox-proof fencing is high for any waterfowl collection. However, once constructed, the day-to-day maintenance of a collection of geese and wildfowl is relatively simple compared to most other livestock keeping. Geese are knowing, relatively intelligent and rewarding birds.

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.