

## How to Raise Ducks in Your Backyard



### A Duck Farming Guide for Beginners

By Dave Holderread - If you want an economical and steady supply of homegrown eggs that are nutritious and tasty, you'll need a flock of backyard chickens, right? Well, not necessarily. You might want to consider learning how to raise ducks in your backyard. No doubt about it, chickens have proven their worth as fine producers of savory eggs and should not be discredited. However, during the last decade, a growing number of us North Americans have been discovering what many Asians and Europeans have known for a long time: under many circumstances, ducks have

advantages over their cackling relatives as producers of eggs.

### Facts & Figures

Relatively few people in the Americas realize that, on the whole, ducks are more proficient layers than chickens. While poultry researchers in North America have spent the last 100 years and countless millions of dollars on improving the productivity of chickens, ducks - for all practical purposes - have been ignored. Despite all the attention chickens received, it's unusual for a commercial flock of Leghorns to average over 250 to 280 eggs per hen in a year's time. On the other hand, Campbell ducks of good strains often average 300 or more eggs per bird during the course of 12 months.

Duck eggs also weigh five to eight ounces per dozen more than chicken eggs. In spite of the fact that some literature on the subject states otherwise, practical experience and tests conducted by institutions such as the University of Nebraska clearly show that duck eggs retain their freshness during storage considerably longer than those of chickens. On various occasions, we have refrigerated well-cleaned duck eggs for four months and longer with no detectable change in flavor.

It is true that, when raised in confinement, a 3-1/2 to 4-1/2 pound duck will consume 20 to 30 percent more feed than a similarly sized Leghorn. But, due to the larger size and greater number of eggs produced by ducks, trials have shown that with proper management, ducks are still more efficient when the quantity of feed to produce a pound of eggs is calculated. Since ducks are considerably better foragers than chickens, the efficiency of ducks is further enhanced when they are allowed to rustle free foods in bodies of water, pastures or grassy yards.

There are a few duck diseases to watch for, but generally, ducks are also incredibly resistant to disease as well as and cold and wet weather. The average mortality rate in home flocks is significantly lower with ducks than with chickens. Due to their greater hardiness, ducks require less elaborate housing than chickens - yet another advantage. And, because egg-type ducks are not accomplished high jumpers, they are easily confined with a two- or three-foot high barrier.

### What About Disadvantages?

When first exploring how to raise ducks in your backyard, you're probably asking, "Okay, what are their drawbacks?" After raising and comparing all species of domestic poultry over the course of the last 20 years, I've yet to run across a major disadvantage in ducks under most small flock conditions.

Waterfowl do like to wash their bills and heads frequently, so their drinking water should be changed at least several times weekly - and preferably daily. If crowded in a small pen with a dirt floor during wet

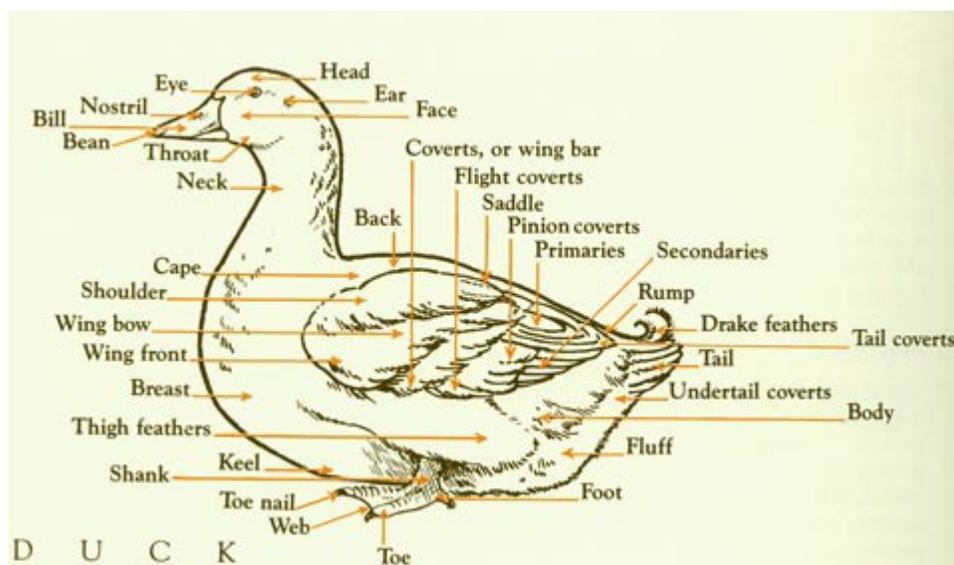
weather, they will turn their quarters into a muddy mess. But, adequate bedding (such as sand, straw or wood shavings), larger pens or the use of wire floors takes care of this problem.

People who have close neighbors are sometimes concerned about noise. On the whole, ducks of the egg breeds are no noisier than chickens, especially when raised in small flocks consisting of six to eight birds.

“But aren’t duck eggs strong-flavored?” is a common question. The flavor of eggs is controlled by the diet of the producing birds. If ducks (or chickens) are fed a ration containing fish products or the birds are allowed to feed in bodies of water or pastures where they can pick up pungent natural foods, the eggs can be tainted.

When duck and chicken eggs are produced with similar feeding and management, the taste of the end product is virtually indistinguishable. Over the years, we have served thousands of scrambled, fried, poached, deviled, soft boiled, souffled and creped duck eggs to meal guests and at potlucks, picnics, wedding buffets and youth camps. In my recollection, not once has anyone suspected they weren’t dining on chicken eggs until we told them otherwise. Interestingly, before being told that they were eating duck cuisine, we’ve had numerous people mention that the eggs were exceptionally good.

The shells of duck eggs are slightly more difficult to crack and are pearly white rather than chalk white as in chicken eggs - but I can’t see these as disadvantages. The albumen of duck eggs is somewhat firmer and usually takes slightly longer to whip up for meringues and angel food cakes than the white of chicken eggs.



Source: University of Wisconsin-Extension, 'Raising Waterfowl' Publication A3311, by Phillip J. Clauer and John L. Skinner.

### Choosing a Duck Breed

How to raise ducks in your backyard starts with duck breed selection. There are a variety of duck breeds that make adequate layers. However, for top efficiency and year 'round production, Campbells, Welsh Harlequins, Indian Runners,

Magpies and Anconas from strains selected for egg production are usually the best choices. Pekin ducks are good seasonal layers of jumbo-sized eggs, but due to their large size and corresponding hearty appetites, they require nearly twice as much feed to produce a pound of eggs when compared to the above-mentioned breeds.

Campbells, and their close relative the Welsh Harlequin, are generally considered the best layers of all domestic poultry. Individual females have been known to produce 360 or more eggs in a year's time, although flock averages are nearer 275 to 325.

For egg-laying needs, a Khaki Campbell duck is an excellent choice (there is also a white variety). Khaki Campbell drakes (males) have iridescent greenish-bronze heads and khaki bodies, while ducks (females) are varying shades of khaki brown with dark seal-brown, silky white plumage, orange feet and legs and bills that range from pink to yellowish-pink in color.

Along with their fine laying prowess, the graceful Indian Runner ducks are some of the most entertaining of all domestic ducks. Tall and slender, they have often been referred to as “Penguin ducks” due to their nearly vertical carriage. Mature weights of the ducks and drakes are similar to that of Campbells - in the four- to five-pound range.

With proper care, Runners, Magpies and Anconas from good laying strains can produce 200 to over 300 white or blue eggs yearly that average approximately two ounces larger per dozen than Campbell eggs. Runners are bred in a rainbow of colors, including White, Fawn and White, Penciled, Solid Fawn, Black, Blue, Chocolate, Buff and Gray.

### **Feed**

You're probably wondering what do ducks eat? To keep ducks laying the year around, they must be supplied an adequate amount of laying feed that provides a minimum of 15 to 16% crude protein. Most chicken laying rations prove satisfactory, although those that are medicated have been suspected of causing illness - even death - in ducks, especially when birds are raised in confinement and cannot dilute the potency of the medications through foraging. To reduce waste and prevent ducks from choking, pellets are preferred, but course crumbles normally work out okay. Fine, powdery feeds should be avoided.

Feed can be left in front of the birds at all times in a trough or hopper feeder, or it can be given twice daily in quantities that the ducks will clean up in 10 to 15 minutes. The first method ensures that the ducks are never deprived of feed, while the second system helps prevent feed loss to rodents and encourages the fowl to forage during the day. However, laying birds cannot be expected to continue laying consistently, particularly during cold weather, if their intake of concentrated feeds is inadequate. To produce mild-flavored eggs, feed containing marine products should not be utilized. Dr. George Arscott, formerly head of the Oregon State University Poultry Science Department, also urges that cottonseed meal not be used in breeding or laying rations since this protein supplement contains a toxin that can reduce hatchability and produce strange coloration in eggs, especially if the eggs are stored several weeks before being eaten. You might also want to keep in mind that feed stuffs such as corn and dehydrated or fresh greens cause bright-colored yolks, while wheat, oats and barley result in pale yolks. While producing, ducks are very sensitive to sudden changes in their diets. To avoid throwing your birds into a premature molt and drastically reducing egg production, it's wise to never change feeds while ducks are laying. If the brand or type of feed you've been using must be altered, do so gradually, preferably over a span of at least a week or 10 days.

### **Water**

When exploring how to raise ducks in your backyard, it's important to understand waterfowl's critical relationship with water. High-producing ducks need a constant supply of reasonably clean drinking water. Both the number and size of eggs will suffer if birds are frequently allowed to go thirsty.

Water containers do not need to be elaborate, although I do suggest that they be at least four to six inches deep to permit the ducks to clean their bills and eyes. For just a couple of ducks, a gallon tin can will suffice - and is easily cleaned. For a larger number of birds, a three- to five-gallon bucket placed below a slowly dripping faucet or outfitted with a float valve works well. Larger containers - such as a child's wading pool or an old hot water tank that has been cut in half - will be enjoyed for bathing by ducks, but can be a nuisance to clean out regularly. Ducks do not need bathing water to remain healthy. To prevent unsanitary mud holes from developing around the watering area, it's advantageous to place all watering receptacles on wire-covered platforms or locate them on the outside of the pen where the birds must reach through fencing in order to drink.

During cold weather, when drinking water freezes, an electric water warmer (a variety of such devices are available from the larger poultry and game bird supply dealers) can be used or lukewarm water should be provided a minimum of two or three times daily.

## **Housing**

With their well-oiled feathers and thick coating of down, ducks are amazingly resistant to cold and wet weather. For ducks in general, a windbreak that is bedded on the protected side with dry litter usually provides sufficient protection in areas where temperatures occasionally drop to 0° F. However, for laying ducks, feed conversion and egg yields can be improved if ducks are housed at nighttime whenever temperatures regularly fall more than 5° to 10° F below the freezing level.

The duck shelter can be a simple shed-like structure (approximately three feet high) and does not require furnishings such as raised nests, perches and dropping pits. When ducks are housed only at night, a minimum of three to five square feet of floor space per duck is recommended. If you anticipate keeping your ducks inside continuously during severe weather, providing each bird with eight to 15 square feet helps keep bedding reasonably dry and sanitary.

Because ducks roost on the ground at night, they are susceptible to predators. Under most circumstances, ducks should be locked up at nighttime in a yard that is tightly fenced with woven wire or netting at least four feet high. In areas where thieves such as weasels, raccoons and large owls are known to roam, it is much safer to lock ducks in a varmint-proof building or pen at nightfall.

## **Lighting**

For consistent winter egg production - especially in cold climates - ducks, like chickens, must be exposed to a minimum of 13 to 14 hours of light daily. Therefore, during the short days between September and April, laying birds need supplemental lighting in most areas of the Northern Hemisphere. Small flock owners often ignore this requirement and end up being disappointed with their birds' performance. However, day length is extremely important since it is the photoperiod that automatically turns the reproductive organs of poultry on and off.

The intensity of light required is low. One 25-watt clear or white bulb located five to six feet above floor level will provide sufficient illumination for approximately 100 square feet of ground space. Probably more important than intensity is consistency. It is paramount that the length of light never decreases while birds are producing heavily, or else the rate of lay can be drastically curtailed or brought to a sudden halt. One method is to leave a light burning all night, which helps in keeping the birds calm. However, ducks exposed to 24 hours of light daily seem to have a tendency to go broody after several months. A better system, and the one we have used extensively, is to purchase an automatic timer switch (small, dependable models are available for about \$10 from most hardware dealers) that can be set to expose the birds to 13 to 16 hours of light daily by turning the lights on before daybreak and off after night fall. To prevent premature broodiness and molting, 16 to 17 hours of light each day seems to be the upper limit for ducks.

## **One Last Word**

Now that you know how to raise ducks in your backyard, I want to leave you with this thought. One reason egg-laying ducks have been rather slow catching on in this country is that high producing stock has often been difficult to locate. Sad to say, the productivity of many breeding flocks has been allowed to degenerate, and much too frequently, any ducks even slightly resembling Campbells or Runners have been sold as the real article.

I would like to emphasize that if you decide to raise ducks for the production of eating eggs, by all means make sure you acquire birds that have been selected specifically for high egg yields. Fortunately, there are several breeding farms and hatcheries in the U.S. today that are working with, and distributing, fine laying ducks.