Agricultural Extension Service ● University of Minnesota

FACT SHEET

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Raising Ducks

Around 10 million ducks are raised annually for meat in the United States. Most are produced under confinement on specialized duck farms in a few commercially important duck production areas. Many farms still raise a few ducks primarily for family use or local sale. This publication is intended for the latter group.

Farm flock ducks are raised primarily for meat. Although most breeds used are relatively poor layers, the flock should be managed to save the eggs produced for food purposes or hatching. The commercial duck industry is built around the Pekin breed. Pekins reach market weight early and are fairly good egg producers, but are poor setters and seldom raise a brood. The Rouen is a popular farm flock breed. It is slower growing than the Pekin, but reaches the same weight over the 5-6 month period of feeding and foraging under farm flock conditions. Its slower growth and colored plumage make it undesirable for mass commercial production. The Muscovy, a breed unrelated to other domestic ducks, is also used to some extent in farm flocks. They are good foragers and make good setters. Muscovy males are much larger than the females at market age. Meat production is generally of primary importance in selecting a breed, but egg production for propagation, brooding tendency, and the white plumage which produces an attractive dressed carcass should also be considered.

The keeping of small, ornamental varieties of ducks, sometimes called bantam ducks, for exhibition or hobby purposes is increasing. Included in this grouping are White and Gray Calls, Black East Indias, Wood Ducks, Mandarins, and sometimes Teal. Most general poultry shows and some special bantam shows offer classes for these ducks.

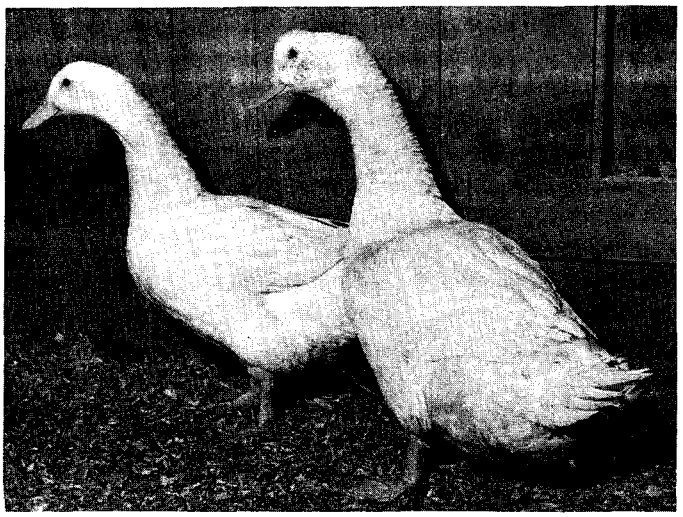
Brooding Ducklings

Small groups of ducklings can be brooded by broody chicken hens and most breeds of ducks other than Pekin and Runner. If the ducklings aren't hatched by the broody female, place them under her at night so that she will more readily accept them.

Ducklings can be artificially brooded in about the same way as baby chicks. Due to their rapid growth, ducklings will need heat a shorter period of time and floor space requirements will increase more rapidly.

Any small building or garage or barn corner can be used as a brooding area for small numbers of birds. The brooding area should be dry, reasonably well lighted and ventilated, and free from drafts. Cover the floor with about 4 inches of absorbent litter material, such as wood shavings, chopped straw, or peat moss. Litter dampness is more of a problem with ducks than with chicks. Good litter management will require removal of wet spots and frequent addition of clean, dry litter. Be sure litter is free of mold.

Infrared heat lamps are a convenient source of heat for brooding small numbers of birds. Use one 250-watt lamp for



30 ducklings. Heat lamps provide radiant heat to the birds under them. Since the air isn't heated, room temperature measurement isn't so important.

When using hover-type brooders, brood only half as many ducklings as the rated chick capacity. Because ducklings are larger than chicks in size, it may be necessary to raise the hover 3-4 inches higher. Have the temperature at the edge of the hover 85° to 90°F. when the ducklings arrive. Reduce it 5° to 10° per week.

Confine the birds to the heated area with a corrugated paper chick guard for the first 3-4 days. Watch the actions of the birds as a clue to their comfort. If they are too hot, they will move away from the heat. If too cold, they may pile up and be noisy.

High temperatures may result in slower feathering and growth. Supplementary heat may be needed for 5-6 weeks in cold weather; in summer, only 2-3 weeks. By 4 weeks of age the ducklings should be feathered enough to be outdoors except in extremely cold, wet weather. In some areas attention to predator control may be necessary when the ducklings are turned out.

Allow ½-square foot of floor space per bird during the first 2 weeks. Increase this to at least 1-square foot by 4 weeks. If the birds are to remain confined after the first month, provide them with at least 2-square feet of floor space.

Feeding

Ducklings should have feed and drinking water available when they are started under the brooder or hen. Use waterers the birds can't get into. This is especially important in the brooding area since ducklings are easily chilled when they become wet while still in the "down" stage. Pans or troughs with wire guards are satisfactory. Place waterers over low, wire-cov-

ered frames to help reduce wet litter problems. Change waterers or adjust size as birds grow. The waterer should be wide enough and deep enough for a bird to dip its bill and head.

In some areas commercial suppliers have feeds formulated for duck feeding. Check with the suppliers in your vicinity. Growers desiring to mix their own feeds should write to their Extension poultry specialist for formulas. If duck feeds aren't available, start ducklings on crumbled or pelleted chick starter for the first 2 weeks. Place feed for the first few days on egg case flats or other rough paper; slick-surfaced paper may cause leg injuries. Ducklings can be fed a pelleted grower ration plus cracked corn, or other grain. Keep feed before the birds at all times and provide insoluble grit.

Ducks are easy to raise because they are hardy and not susceptible to many of the common poultry diseases. The use of medicated feeds isn't usually necessary. Very few additives have been approved for nutritional or medicinal use in duck feeds. Waterfowl may be more sensitive to some drugs than other poultry. Incorrect use of certain medicated feeds formulated for chickens and turkeys could harm ducklings.

Small flocks of ducklings raised in the late spring with access to green feed outdoors generally have few nutritional problems. While ducks are not as good foragers as geese, they do eat some green feed and farm flocks are usually allowed to run at large. Cut green feed can be supplied to the birds when they must be kept inside in bad weather. Water for swimming isn't necessary for successful duck production.

Under commercial conditions, Pekin ducklings are ready for market when 7-9 weeks old. These birds weigh 6-7 pounds and have consumed 20-25 pounds of feed. Rouens raised under farm flock conditions may take 5 months to reach these weights. Muscovy ducks take somewhat longer. The holiday retail duck market is greatest from Thanksgiving through New Year's. Ducks grown for home use or limited local sales can be slaughtered any time. If ducklings are kept longer than 11-12 weeks, new pinfeathers begin to come out, making it difficult to pick them clean for another several weeks. Growers planning on any commercial marketings should make scheduling plans in advance with a processor or marketing organization.

Breeder Flock Management

Select stock from flocks hatched in April and May. Using males from early flocks will help insure their readiness for mating for the start of the following year. Choose vigorous birds with good weight, conformation, and feathering prior to marketing the young flock. Keep one male for each 5-6 females. Young birds should be selected only from families with good egg production, hatchability, and fertility records.

Identification of males and females is necessary when selecting birds for breeder flocks and for exhibition. Even in breeds that have a sex differentiated color pattern, both sexes may resemble each other in their summer plumage. Ducks and geese can be sexed by everting the vent and examining the reproductive organs (see Poultry Fact Sheet 44 "Raising Geese"). This practice requires some experience and may be more easily done with day-old birds or during the breeding season. In some breeds mature males develop characteristic curled feathers at the base of the tail. After about 6 weeks of age the sounds ducks make can be a clue to their sex. Females have a more definite sharp quack, while males have a sound which is not nearly so loud or harsh but more of a muffled sound.

Birds held for breeders must be kept from becoming too fat. The breeder-developer ration fed during the holding period should contain less energy than starter and grower rations. If the grower ration is continued during the holding period, gradually restrict feed to about 70 percent of the amount fed at the start.

Change to a breeder-laying ration about 1 month before egg production starts. Don't bring birds into production before 7 months of age. Feeding oystershell is optional to improve eggshell quality. Increasing day length with lighting stimulates egg production. Provide a 14-hour day 3 weeks before the desired egg production date. The flock should be laying at a high rate of production within 5-6 weeks. Meat-type breeds should remain above 50 percent production for about 5 months.

Breeders should be provided with a clean, dry, well-ventilated shed or house. Allow 5-6 feet of floor space per bird. Birds are often confined at night to get a maximum number of eggs and then allowed daytime access to the yard. Provide floor level nest boxes. Most eggs are laid in early morning. Gather eggs about 7 a.m. and let the birds out of the house. If some birds stay on the nests, a second collection can be made later in the day. Clean, dry litter and nesting material will help produce clean eggs.

Soiled eggs should be cleaned soon after gathering. They should be washed in warm water (at least 20°F. warmer than the eggs) containing an egg cleaning and sanitizing compound used in accordance with the instructions of the manufacturer. Store eggs for hatching at 55°F. and a relative humidity of 75 percent. Eggs stored longer than 2 weeks may decline in hatchability. If stored more than a week, turn eggs daily to prevent yolks from sticking to shells.

Incubation

Muscovy ducks require 35 days of incubation; eggs of other domestic duck breeds require 28 days. A chicken hen can set on 9-11 duck eggs. Place the nest where the hen won't be disturbed during the incubation period and provide a convenient source of feed and water. With hens, the nest should be checked at hatching time. Remove early hatching ducklings as soon as they hatch and place them in a cloth-lined basket in a warm place. This may prevent the hen from leaving the nest before completion of the hatch or trampling some of the young if she becomes restless.

Artificial incubation of waterfowl eggs seems to be as much art as science. Follow the manufacturer's directions for the machine being used. Duck eggs require much more moisture during incubation than chicken eggs. You will gain know-how from experience in incubating duck eggs which should increase the success of your operation.

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