

Brooding and Rearing Ducklings and Goslings

Glenn Geiger and Harold Biellier
Department of Animal Sciences, University of Missouri-Columbia

Brooding requirements

Natural brooding. Goslings and ducklings can be successfully brooded by broody chicken hens and most breeds of ducks and geese. If the young birds were not hatched by the broody female, place them under her at night. Be certain broody birds are free of lice and mites. Provide the hen and her brood with a dry comfortable shelter.

The hen will need grain and plenty of fresh, clean water supplied in a container that will not allow the young to get wet.

Artificial brooding. Today, hatcheries produce day-old ducklings and goslings in large numbers. Commercial growers brood and rear them in about the same way they would baby chicks.

Ducks and geese are hardy and are not susceptible to many of the common poultry diseases. This makes them easy to raise. Brooding requirements are simple and special housing or equipment is not necessary. Because of their rapid growth and early feathering, they do not require as long a brooding period as do baby chicks.

Types of brooders

The infrared heat lamp type of electric brooder is recommended for brooding small groups of birds. Many commercial raisers use gas brooders, but any type of good baby chick brooder may be used successfully. When using infrared brooders, allow one 250-watt lamp per 25 goslings or 30 ducklings. With other types, you can determine the number of birds per hover by cutting the brooder's rated chick capacity by half for ducklings and by one-third for goslings. Because ducklings and goslings are larger, it usually is necessary to raise the hover 3 to 4 inches higher than for chicks.

Brooding temperatures

The behavior of the young birds is a better guide than a thermometer. When brooder temperature is too hot, the birds will crowd away from the heat. High temperatures may result in a slower rate of feathering and growth.

When the temperature is uncomfortably cold, goslings tend to huddle together under the brooder or crowd in corners. Keeping a light on the birds at night will discourage such crowding. An infrared brooder provides enough light for this purpose.

When the brooding temperature is right, the goslings will be well distributed over the floor. At night, the birds should form a circle around the hover.

A starting temperature near 90 degrees at the edge of the hover is about right. This temperature should be reduced about 5 to 10 degrees per week until 70 degrees is reached. When using infrared brooders, air temperature is not so important. Heat usually is not required after the fifth or sixth week, and in good weather, the young birds can be taken out to pasture.

The brooder house

A special building is not required. It simply must provide protection from the weather and be reasonably well lit and ventilated. For brooding small numbers, a colony brooder house or any small building may be used. For brooding larger numbers, a barn, large poultry house or regular broiler house is recommended.

A wood, concrete, or dirt floor is satisfactory. Allow about 1-1/2 square feet of floor space per bird and cover the floor with about four inches of absorbent litter. Sawdust, shavings, ground corn cobs, cottonseed hulls, peanut hulls or peat moss are all good. Dampness is apt to be more of a problem with ducklings and goslings than it typically is in brooding baby chicks. Removal of wet spots and frequent additions of clean, dry litter are recommended.

Feeding

Goslings and ducklings are ready for feed and water when they arrive. Use crumbilized chick or poult starter for the first week to 10 days. A pelleted grower ration plus cracked corn, wheat, milo, oats or other grain can be fed after this time. Keep feed before the birds at all times. Also, provide insoluble grit. Place feed on rough paper or cup flats for the first few days. Do not use chick box tops or other smooth-surfaced lids or paper as feeders. When such slick-surfaced materials are used, leg damage results.

Be certain the feed you are using contains only those additives approved for ducks and

geese. Certain types of drugs that are sometimes included in chick starting and growing mash for coccidiosis control are harmful to goslings. They may cause lameness or even death. Coccidiosis has not been a problem in waterfowl production in this area.

Commercially grown ducklings generally are ready for market in seven to eight weeks. Goslings usually are marketed in the fall months at 24 to 30 weeks of age. Finishing rations should contain some protein similar to turkey finishing rations.

Water

Plenty of drinking water should be available at all times. Goslings and ducklings consume enormous quantities due to rapid growth. Use waterers that the birds cannot get into and splash. This is important in the brooder house. Water for swimming is not necessary; however, ponds provide an easy way to water goslings on pasture. Hog waterers make good range waterers for waterfowl.

Pasture for goslings

Make arrangements to provide pasture or lawn clippings starting as early as the first week. When the weather is mild, goslings can be let out and allowed to graze when only a few days old.

Grass is the natural food of goslings. Great savings in feed can be made by providing good pasture throughout the growing period. At five or six weeks of age they can subsist entirely on good pasture, although some supplemental feeding is recommended until the birds are completely feathered.

Experience has shown that ladino clover makes fine pasture for goslings. Other types of white clovers also are very good, as are most varieties of grasses. In Missouri, bluegrass, orchardgrass, timothy and brome grass have been used. Small grains such as barley, wheat and rye make excellent early or fall pasture. Goslings or geese will scarcely touch sweet clover, lespedeza or alfalfa.

Allow about one acre of pasture for each 20 to 40 birds. The amount required depends on the size of the goslings and quality of pasture. When the pasture is poor, supplemental grain feeding is necessary.

A pasture rotation system is recommended. Protect goslings from rain or wet grass for the first few weeks, especially when the weather is cool. Shade must be provided in hot weather.

Because ducks do not forage as well as geese, it is recommended that commercial growers rear ducks without access to pasture. Ducks will, however, use some green feed and eat insects. The small grower probably will not want to confine his flock.

Be certain that pasture and green feeds you use do not have any chemical treatment that would be harmful to the flock.

Fencing

It usually is necessary to fence the pastures or fields. Most woven wire field fencing is of small enough mesh to confine birds 4 to 6 weeks or older. Two-inch mesh poultry netting is commonly used for younger birds. The fence does not need to be higher than ordinary heights since the birds seldom fly. Eighteen inches to two feet is an adequate height. Several farmers have reported good success using electric fencing.

References

- *Brooding Chicks With Infra-red Lamps*, U.S.D.A. Leaflet No. 397.
- *Raising Ducks*, U.S.D.A. Farmer's Bulletin No. 2215.
- *Standard of Perfection for Domesticated Land Fowl and Water Fowl*, American Poultry Association, Inc., Crete, Nebraska 68333.
- *Duck and Goose Raising*, Bulletin No. 532, Ontario Department of Agriculture, Parliament Building, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- *Raising Geese*, Fact Sheet, Poultry No. 44, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101.
- *Raising Geese*, U.S.D.A. Farmer's Bulletin No. 2251.

The authors are grateful to Fred Cervinka, Heart of Missouri Poultry Farm and Hatchery, Columbia, Missouri, for information, assistance and advice in the preparation of this guide.

Copyright 1999 University of Missouri. Published by University Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Ronald J. Turner, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Missouri and Lincoln University, Columbia, Missouri 65211. • University Extension does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability or status as a Vietnam-era veteran in employment or programs. If you have special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act and need this publication in an alternative format, write ADA Officer, Extension and Agricultural Information, 1-98 Agriculture Building, Columbia, MO 65211, or call (573) 882-7216. Reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate your special needs.