

AILMENTS AND REMEDIES

INFORMATION SHEET

Many people enjoy keeping ducks and geese and with a bit of forethought and care, few problems occur. Good stockmanship is very important, this means getting to know your birds and their regular habits, spending some time each day watching them and trying to give them a daily routine. Often it is a change in their behaviour that can be the first sign of illness or injury. It has been said that good stockmanship is 90% watching and 10% doing!

Also a good, well maintained environment should help reduce the possibility of ailments and injuries to your stock. Before releasing your birds into a new enclosure check it first for any potential hazards. Make sure the area is suitably fenced, remove sharp objects, wire, string, thorny plants and thistles. Can your birds get in and out of their water easily, even if the level drops? Fresh water and dry bedding (avoid hay) are other important factors in maintaining the good health of your stock. Remember that wildfowl are prey species and will hide their symptoms for as long as possible, so early behavioural changes may be the first indication of a health problem. Despite all your good care you may have problems - a few of the more common ones are covered below and some prevention advice.

Aspergillosis

Laboured breathing, poor appetite and general weakness, occasionally accompanied by sticky eyes are an indication of Aspergillosis. Never use hay as bedding for nest boxes or housing, as when old or damp the fungal spores in it multiply which, when inhaled by birds, produce lethal lesions in the lungs and airsacs. Eider and arctic breeding wildfowl are particularly susceptible. Mouldy food and poor storage of pelleted foods are another possible source of fungal infection. Unfortunately, treatment may be prolonged and not effective.

Bubbly Eye

This is a frothy watery discharge from the eye and the lids may be swollen. It occurs most frequently in domestic breeds, and some like Pekin and Muscovy seem to be more susceptible. High ammonia levels will contribute, so clean duck housing regularly. Bathing the affected eye with salt water or cold black tea may help, but ensure that the ducks can at least dunk their heads in their water as they have small tear ducts and need to keep these clean. Also ensure that the pond/drinking water is kept clean, not easy with waterfowl! Sometimes being in an exposed area with no shelter or wind break can cause Bubbly Eye. If the symptoms persist, consult your vet. If the respiratory pathogen, mycoplasma is involved, the sinuses may fluidly swell in domestic ducks, your vet will need to treat the affected birds.

Bumble Foot/Corns

Bumble foot is a bacterial infection entering the foot through a crack or cut causing a swelling on the underside of the foot. This may occur in dry, hot conditions when the bird is running on hard ground, or from an injury caused by sharp objects in the enclosure, so do check your enclosure regularly. Bathing with salt water may help. However if it persists and a hard core/abscess develops under the skin, this has to be removed and veterinary advice should be sought. Corns can be prevented by adding rubber car mats to harsh concrete pond surrounds.

Egg Binding

Birds laying for the first time, or the sudden return of cold conditions can be the stressors causing females difficulty in passing eggs. Symptoms of egg binding are the bird looking very hunched up with feathers fluffed out and generally looking miserable. Sometimes with gentle handling you can feel the egg in the lower end of the oviduct.

Great care should be taken not to break the egg whilst in the cloaca as this may result in death. Birds may be helped by being put in a darkened brooder box with a heat lamp (red bulb), raising the temperature up to 85°F but allowing room for the bird to move away from the heat if required. Warmed olive oil applied to the cloaca may be of some help but veterinary treatment should be sought.

Lameness

In most cases, lameness in ducks and geese (as long as the leg(s) are not hot with infection) is cured by using the only licensed wormer, Flubenvet. This is a powder that goes in the feed for 7 days, add a little vegetable oil to the feed first to stick the powder. Worming should be done at least twice a year and probably outside the breeding season. If birds are too weak to eat, a small amount of the powder can be mixed with water and syringed in to the right hand side of the bird's throat for a couple of days, then the bird should be able to eat and get the wormer from the feed.

Always check for thorns or puncture wounds and also whether an identification ring is the cause of the problem. Clean any wound with antiseptic (F10 paste is useful), observe the bird carefully for a couple of days with minimal handling and if needing isolation (bullying may be a problem) or a smaller pen, a companion must be included. If swimming water is available allow the bird access as this seems to help recovery. If you suspect a fracture (a non-weight-bearing leg) or if the lameness persists, consult your vet.

Lead Poisoning

Beware of using a shotgun or air gun over waterfowl enclosures. Lead pellets may accumulate in the gizzard and cause death. Waterfowl that have flaccid paralysis (of the neck especially) may be affected by lead, a blood test will confirm and if treatment is administered in the early stages, the prognosis is good. New land may have an undiscovered burden of lead, so monitoring behaviour is vital.

Pseudo TB (Yersiniosis)

Mice are notorious carriers of this disease and should be controlled at all times. Food storage bins should be of metal and impenetrable to rodents including rats which also carry Weils disease (zoonotic, humans can get this) so handle any trapped rats using gloves. Starlings and feral pigeon are also likely carriers. Do not over feed your stock in the open, netting over where possible to prevent wild birds from contaminating feeders, or use feeders that are difficult for vermin to access with e.g. a spiral feeder mechanism.

Slipped Wing or Angel Wing

Slipped wing is a problem which can develop in young birds from about six weeks old. It affects both goslings and ducklings and is far more frequent in domestic breeds than wild fowl. The end of the wings droop or fall away from the body. The bird may keep trying to refold its wings to tuck the end joints back into place. At this age the wing primary feathers are developing very rapidly, the quills are full of blood and heavy whilst the joints are still soft and pliable. Slipped wing is a result of feeding crumbs which are high in protein for too long. It is important to change to a growers ration at 14-21 days for call and bantam ducklings and all other breeds of ducks and geese between 7-10 days, introducing whole wheat as further protein reduction at about four weeks of age.

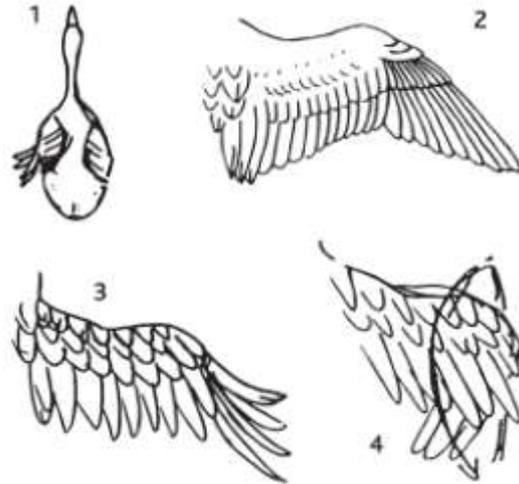
To prevent the wing joint deforming permanently once dropped, it is possible to support the carpal end of the wing with heavy growing primaries by tucking it in to the normal position underneath the radius and ulna (where the secondaries grow from), securing with sticky tape that is not tight, just keeping the wing in the normal position. This must only be left on for three days to avoid joint seizure, but can be done again for three days if the wing still droops. If waterfowl are not treated at this stage, the joint deforms and the primary feathers will always stick out, these can be trimmed after the moult, but it is stressful for the bird and expensive to operate on angel wing.

Stress

Although not an ailment, stress can cause upset and panic to waterfowl causing them to go off their legs thus lowering their resistance to illness. Stress is caused by external forces experienced by the bird which are unfamiliar and cause fright. Examples are; travelling, excess activity in catching a bird (a trout landing net is the best welfare method of catching), bullying by other birds and prolonged cold weather. To aid the recovery of the bird it should be placed in a quiet pen with a companion and it should improve in a few days.

Vermin control

It is part of the legal duty of care to prevent predation of kept species. Fox-proof fencing, preventing aerial vermin from contaminating the ground and/or feeders and trapping rodents are all part of the normal waterfowl keeper's daily activities and checks. Live-catch Larsen traps for corvids (e.g. carrion crows, magpies) are legal and most effective in the spring. Beware carrion crows taking young stock, so thinning down their numbers early in the year is good practice. Buzzards also take young stock but are protected from trapping or shooting, so net over young stock if there are buzzards in your area.



1. **Overhead view of affected bird**
2. **Normal wing with growing feathers**
3. **Slipped wing – growing feathers drooping outwards**
4. **Correct wing showing position of strapping with sticky tape**

Wet Feather

Waterfowl will look bedraggled and will be reluctant to enter the water. In cold conditions the bird may become chilled and die. Wet feather can be caused by mould from willow trees causing irritation and overpreening, which alters the structure of the feathers affecting the waterproofness of them and therefore also the insulating properties. Very muddy conditions, stagnant water or stress can contribute to wet feather. If the bird is stressed, moving to a new enclosure with more selective companions can help. The condition should resolve after the moult. Allow access to drinking water only until moulted.

Worms

All birds are host to various worms which are harmless in small numbers. This can become a problem when another ailment or stress such as change of environment or travelling allows worms to multiply with potential lethal consequences. Birds that are heavily infested may look lethargic, lose weight and need prompt treatment. When introducing new birds to your collection it is advisable to treat the birds with a proprietary wormer obtained from your vet. Flubenvet is commonly used. To prevent worms building up it is advisable to rest grazing areas and pens and apply lime on a three yearly rotation.

Good Husbandry

- Keep stressors to a minimum.
- Use a suitable disinfectant for both huts and equipment such as Virkon or F10.
- Keep dust and ammonia levels low. Ammonia paralyses the small hairs which act like an escalator to move normal mucus up the trachea before being swallowed, encouraging pathogen growth.
- Feed high quality commercial waterfowl feed for the stage of growth and the species of bird.
- Monitor weather changes and take steps to minimise any effects.
- When attending to the stock, begin with the youngest at the start of the day (i.e. with clean clothes).
- Quarantine new stock for 2-3 weeks and use Flubenvet on arrival.
- Worm at least twice yearly with Flubenvet.
- To prevent parasitic worms building up, rest grazing areas and pens and apply lime (leaving the ground clear of stock for three months) on a three yearly rotation.
- Provide vermin control.
- Keep the number of domestic drakes to a minimum and do not overstock.
- Feed domestic geese in winter when the grass has little nutrition.
- Be aware that buying from auctions may carry a disease risk.
- Maintain biosecurity measures and hygiene.

Illustrations by Joe Blossom

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.

Registered Charity No. 263156
British Waterfowl Association
www.waterfowl.org.uk
☎ 01531 671250

British Waterfowl
Association
Conservation | Education | Preservation

