

FENCING

INFORMATION SHEET

Waterfowl in general have wandering, inquisitive natures and are easy targets for the many predators and other hazards which abound in the wild. To be able to maintain and enjoy a collection, whatever its size, it is wise to plan to contain your birds in a secure enclosure at the outset. Your individual circumstances will govern the size and materials you wish to use but the information in this leaflet should guide you to the construction of an appropriate enclosure to protect your birds from the most common predators.

There is a lot of time and money involved in building a pen so time spent at the planning stage is time well spent. It is advisable to visit some waterfowl breeders to look at their fencing before embarking on an extensive construction.

There are many types of poultry fencing and netting to consider. Their suitability is governed by the type of waterfowl to be kept in, predators you wish to keep out, whether birds are shut in at night or not, the size and location of the pen and of course your budget. The most popular options are outlined below:

Poultry or rabbit netting is available in various heights, mesh sizes and thicknesses to suit all budgets and it is therefore the most commonly used material. However, hex netting does not have the longevity and durability of hi-tensile fencing, weld mesh or chain link and if it is not installed properly it is prone to sagging. The choice of a heavy-gauge will ensure fencing lasts longer and looks nicer. In terms of mesh size, 25mm offers a good choice to keep both waterfowl in and predators out but it may only be necessary to use this on the lower level combined with cheaper 50mm toward the top.



Enclosure using poultry netting

Hi-tensile poultry fencing is designed for the free-range poultry market and has optimum stay and line wire spacing for bird safety and welfare. Despite being more expensive at the outset than traditional poultry netting it is durable, long lasting and easy to install. One of its main advantages is that it retains its shape, therefore always looks smart. It is especially suited where other livestock are present or where there is the need to tie in with other livestock fencing. The line and wire spacing at the bottom of this fencing is not small enough to keep ducklings in or to keep predators like mink and weasels out.



Enclosure using hi-tensile fencing

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Weld mesh is a good option for permanent fencing as it will last for years', however, although it requires less posts than hex netting it is more expensive at the outset. Weld mesh will stand up particularly well to predators such as badgers and dogs. For absolute security 12 gauge 25mm mesh is recommended but if smaller vermin are not a problem then 50mm mesh is adequate. Weld mesh is a good choice for use in construction of aviaries and smaller pens.

Chain link offers a strong and robust option for those who wish to fence the exterior of their whole property or create very large pens. In the long term it provides a secure, low-maintenance and a cheap option although it can be cumbersome to install. Choice of a heavy-gauge, 50mm mesh is recommended to provide a secure boundary; however, it must be combined with a smaller mesh wire at the bottom to keep your bird heads in and predators out! The supporting posts can be wood, metal or less attractive, but more durable, concrete.

Electric poultry netting offers a versatile fencing solution that is relatively cheap and easy to install. However, both ducks and geese are prone to sticking their heads through, getting stuck or tangled in this type of fencing. They can also get tangled in it if panicked which can result in serious injury or death. It is, therefore, not recommended for waterfowl.

FENCE CONSTRUCTION

If you intend to let your birds wander the garden during the day and then to shut them in a shed at night, a fence 1.2m (4ft) in height will keep in most domestic waterfowl with the exception of call and bantam ducks that are not wing clipped or pinioned. In the breeding season these females are prone to flying out to lay eggs elsewhere and once broody may well be lost to predators. For pinioned wildfowl 1.2m (4ft) in height will be adequate for all but the tree duck species that may climb or get enough lift on a windy day to escape.

The drawback to this husbandry system is the need to shut up the birds before dark and never to miss an evening. The fox checks on you every night!

Foxes, badgers, cats and dogs are the most common creatures to try to scale a fence to get to confined waterfowl - the fox being the most persistent and destructive. Small predators, like rats, mink, stoats and weasels, will often get in but can be dealt with by trapping.

Therefore, the minimum height recommendation for a secure pen is 1.8m (6ft). This can be made predator proof with many variations e.g.

- A 1.8m (6ft) wire fence with a 30cm (1ft) overhang facing outwards and 30cm (1ft) dug into the ground.
- A 1.8m (6ft) wire fence with outside electric wires.
- A 1.8m-2.4m (6ft to 8ft) fence with polythene overhead netting.

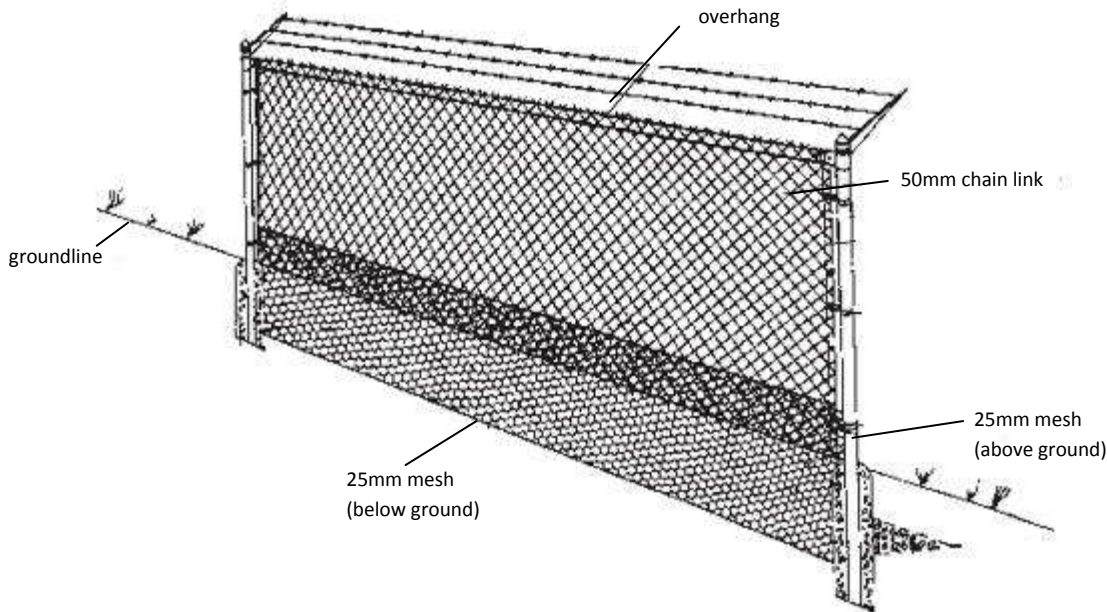


Diagram 1: Example of secure fencing 1.8m (6ft) high, dug in and with overhang

For a 1.8m (6ft) pen use round tanalised timber posts that are 2.1m -2.4m in length and 75mm in diameter, together with thicker 125mm diameter straining/corner posts. Posts should be spaced approximately 3.6m to 4.5m apart and knocked firmly into the ground to the required height. If using poultry or rabbit netting, two strands of 3mm straining wire should be applied to the posts, one near the top and one half way down in order to provide a strong supporting frame on which to hang the wire.

If you wish to keep small ground predators out, to keep ducklings in or to prevent adult birds poking their head through then 25mm poultry/rabbit netting will be required for the lower level. This can be combined with 50mm poultry netting above or used in addition to other more robust fencing choices. It is advisable to bury at least 30cm of this wire into the ground to prevent foxes or badgers digging under your fence and for a further 60cm to be carried up the fence. If it is not possible to dig down the wire can be turned out and pegged firmly; either laying it on the ground near the surface and covering with turf, or covering with soil for the grass to grow through. This will also prevent birds escaping under the wire.



Poultry netting with bottom part buried, combined with three electric wires

If constructing a fence with an overhang, barbed wire, electric fencing or wire mesh are equally effective materials. If using mesh, it should deliberately be left floppy as this is more difficult for foxes to scale.

The addition of two stands of electrified wire outside the fence is very effective in deterring foxes, the adage 'once bitten twice shy' certainly seems to apply! Wires should be set 15cm and 30cm high and 30cm out from the pen wire to prevent both digging and jumping. Setting an additional strand close to the wire, using good quality insulators, at the bottom and top will help deter climbers such as mink or weasel. See diagram 2 or variations shown in the photos.

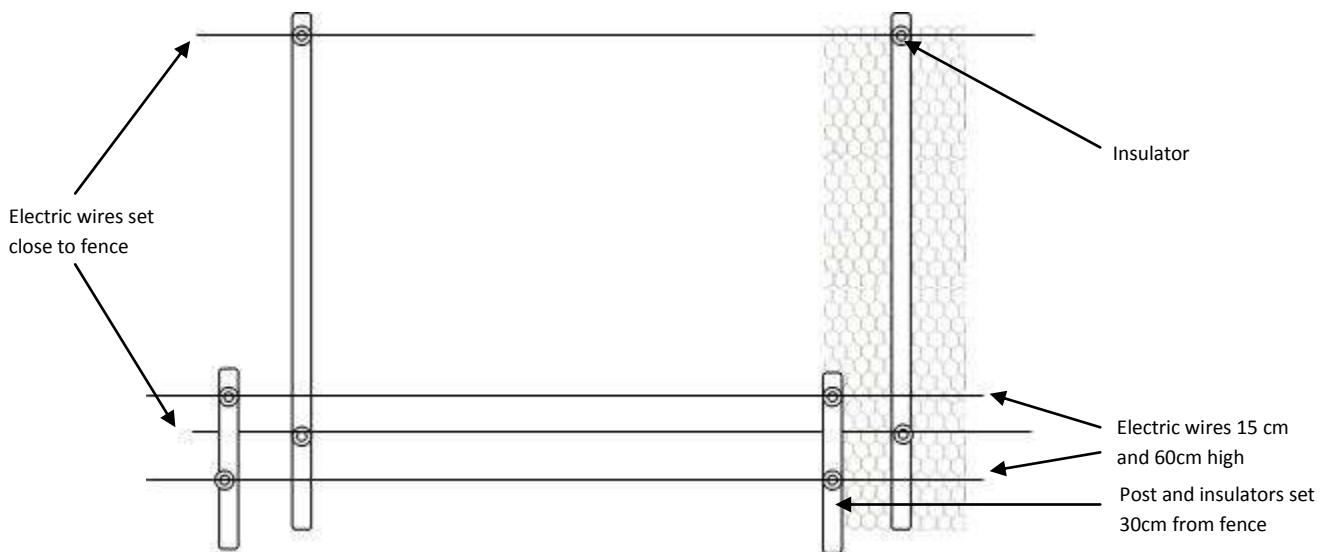


Diagram 2: Electric fencing set up to deter both digging and climbing predators

Systems powered by a 12 volt car battery and energizer, sited near the fence, are simple and easy to maintain. You can add a solar charger to this system to top up power on a daily basis but most small solar panels will only be sufficient to prolong the time between battery charges. If using the mains supply don't forget a backup system will be required for when the power is down. Whichever system, without a good earth rod the fence will not operate properly. 30cm stakes provided in most electric fencing packs are not sufficient, a 1m earth rod driven into the soil is recommended.

It is always advisable to test and run an electric fencing system for a couple of days before you place any valuable birds in the pen for the first time, thereafter the fence should be routinely checked to ensure it is working efficiently. Small testers are available for this which show the charge being sent out and indicate its power; in addition a small light can be linked to the wire at an easily



High-tensile poultry wire combined with 5 electric wires

visible point, which will flash with each pulse of the fence. It is important to control surrounding vegetation to stop short circuiting of the system.

Entranceways to the pen should be well sited for ease of access and avoid wet areas. It is advisable to have a wood or concrete sill between any gateposts to deter predators from digging through at this vulnerable point. Don't forget that putting up a good fence and leaving an easy climbing frame such as the gate or the branch of a tree is a big mistake!

Good fencing is costly but, compared with the loss of valuable birds or savings in upkeep, it is money well spent. It also brings peace of mind.

*Compiled by Clare Lovegrove and Tim Daniels with help from John Lovatt
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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.

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