

STARTING TO KEEP DOMESTIC GEESE

INFORMATION SHEET

All breeds of domestic geese have been selectively bred from the wild greylag goose (*Anser anser*) except the Chinese and African, which were probably bred from the swan goose (*Anser cygnoides*). Geese are full of character and good pets, guards and lawnmowers, and sources of meat and eggs. Most of the pure breeds are relatively rare, and it is worth thinking about keeping a pure breed rather than cross-bred birds, particularly if it is intended to breed from them, from a preservation point of view. Pure breeds of geese are classed as Light (such as Chinese, pilgrim, Sebastopol, Roman and the smallest of all, the Czech), Medium (Brecon buff, greyback, Pomeranian, West of England) and Heavy (African, American buff, Embden, Toulouse).

As with all advice, take into account your specific situation. The best way to learn what your problems are is to watch your birds carefully.

HOUSING

A good dry, solid house will be required, preferably within a fox-proof pen. A stable, shed or small building will provide suitable housing. Geese will soon get used to being put away at dusk. If purpose-built, the house does not need to be more than 1.8m high and 1.2m at the back. An area of 2.5m x 1.8m will comfortably house 4-6 medium geese. A good wide door should be provided and the windows replaced with weld mesh, sufficiently small to prevent rats from entering. Raising the house off the ground helps to keep the house dry. Ideally, the house should face away from the prevailing winter wind and rain and be away from overhanging trees. A higher roof makes cleaning easier. If more than one goose is kept with a gander, sections partitioned off will encourage your geese to make their nests in a secure place, as well as preventing them from stealing each other's eggs when sitting. Straw makes the best bedding and needs to be changed regularly.



FEEDING

There are many different opinions on feeding. The most important factor is adequate grass. Regarding additional food, as a guide, feed as much food in the morning as the geese can eat in 10 minutes, wheat in the summer and breeders pellets in the winter. If the birds are hungry they will usually complain loudly in the early evening. The shape of their crops is also an indication of how much extra is needed. If they have grazed adequately during the day they will not require feeding at night. If the weather has been excessively dry or there is continual frost or snow then an evening feed of wheat is necessary.

Geese are useful if kept in an orchard as they mow neatly all around mature trees and will enjoy eating windfalls. They will chew and damage the trunks of small trees, however, which will need robust protection. They also love vegetable scraps such as raw cabbage, but if they reject anything, clear it away or you will attract flocks of starlings and other birds. It is a good idea to mix a very small amount of oyster shell and quartz/limestone grit with their normal diet. This helps digestion and makes for strong eggshells.



WATER

Geese must have constant access to clean water both for drinking and preening. It should be deep enough for them to immerse their heads. Running water or a pond will be much appreciated but geese can manage with an old bath, sink or low tub. There should be a means of draining the bath and replenishing the water regularly. If the container can be moved around, it will prevent the area becoming too muddy. With ingenuity many different containers can be adapted for use but make sure the geese, especially young birds, can get out easily. The bank of a pond or stream needs to have a gentle slope to prevent leg or foot damage. It is also helpful to have gravel bases at the gate entrances and round the watering area to keep mud at bay.

MANAGEMENT

Under the best conditions one acre of grass will support 10-15 heavy breeds or 20 light to medium breed geese. For a medium to large-sized garden a pair or trio is sufficient. Generally geese will graze happily wandering hither and thither, frequently where you do not want them to go. Preparation prior to purchasing geese is necessary. Your soil may be acidic and you may need to spread some ground chalk where the geese will graze. If you are new to your property, consider the nature of the soil, aspect and drainage. It is beneficial to have a spare space and be able to move birds onto fresh grass. New stock should be wormed on arrival, and then twice a year thereafter to keep the birds fit and healthy. Wormers can be obtained from most feed suppliers or from your vet.

BREEDING

A breeding pen consists of 1 to 3 geese to one gander. Pens should be set up in early December if possible. When pairing up birds into separate pens, do remember to clip the flight feathers on one wing. This will stop them fence hopping and possibly confusing the different pairs. Once you have paired up your birds, feed them with breeder pellets.



Traditionally you should expect your first eggs about the 14th February, Valentine's Day. First year birds will not generally provide good hatching eggs, though there are always exceptions to the rule and the later laid eggs can be hatchable. Eggs are usually laid every other day.

INCUBATION

There are three basic ways to hatch eggs:

- Use an incubator.
- Collect the eggs and place them under a broody hen or bantam.
- Leave them with the goose.

Goose eggs are not easy to hatch as chickens or ducks, and it is advisable to refer to a good book or books before attempting to upon hatch using an incubator. Still air incubators are generally favoured over fan incubators as they more accurately model the situation under a

mother goose, with a temperature gradient within the egg. Generally goose eggs need to lose quite a lot of water during incubation to give the gosling room to turn within the shell to hatch, and with still air incubators it is not advisable to use additional humidity.

The most successful way seems to be using broodies or the goose herself. When a goose is broody or you have a reliable broody hen, date the eggs with a pencil and set them. Try to give the goose her own private area so that she can sit undisturbed. This is not always possible and you may find other geese laying clean eggs in the same nest. The eggs take 28-30 days to incubate and it is important to ensure that the sitting goose can obtain enough food during her brief excursions off the nest twice a day.

There is nothing more rewarding than the first batch of fluffy goslings, especially when allowed to stay with the parents. Sexing goslings is straightforward and there are good books available with directions. Pilgrim and West of England goslings can be sexed on sight at, or even before, hatching. Many BWA members will be able to help. Be warned that sexing is easiest when the birds are very young or mature but in-between is difficult. There are several good books which are available from the BWA Bookshop, which will provide much more detailed information as well as standards of the pure breeds.

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.