

STARTING TO KEEP WILDFOWL

INFORMATION SHEET

To anyone who has not previously kept waterfowl of any kind it is suggested that you read some basic information about their requirements before reading this leaflet. The BWA information leaflet "Starting To keep Domestic Ducks" contains some helpful facts. However it must be kept in mind that all domestic breeds of duck, except Muscovies, are descended from the Wild Mallard and therefore have similar basic needs. This is not true of Wildfowl, as many species have definite individual requirements, although there are many common factors such as fencing. This information leaflet is designed to lead the experienced domestic duck keeper on to keep comparatively undemanding wildfowl or to guide the newcomer to all duck keeping along the first few steps.

RECOMMENDED SPECIES

When deciding which wildfowl species you would like to keep, try to visit several collections and talk to breeders about the birds that you like best. Ducks will only thrive if you are able to give them an environment which suits their particular needs, so bear this in mind when making your final choice. Most of the wildfowl listed on this leaflet are native European species which can be kept together in one enclosure and all have similar environmental needs which can be met within that enclosure. Recommended species are:



Tufted duck

Diving ducks— for example Tufted Duck and European Pochard. These will need a pond that is up to a metre deep.

Dabbling ducks— these include Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Common Shoveler and European Wigeon. Males and females of all the species above have distinctive plumage, so it is easy to be certain that you have true pairs.

Geese- Barnacle, Pink-footed and White-fronted. These all need plenty of grazing space, so concentrate on ducks if your enclosure is small.



Barnacle goose

ENCLOSURE

This should be as large as possible in order to avoid overgrazing, erosion of favourite spots and the build-up of parasites caused by overcrowding. A free-draining soil is an obvious advantage. In smaller gardens, collections of wildfowl can be kept in aviaries with netted over tops. These must be predator proof because cats and foxes can be a problem even in the suburbs.

WATER

All species require ponds, preferably with flowing water. Artificial ponds need a regular change of water. The pond should be as large as possible with a sloping bottom going down at least 1 metre (3') to accommodate the diving ducks.

There should be easy access into the pond and a slope or ramp with a non-slip surface to allow the heavier birds such as geese to walk up out of the water. It is a good idea to edge the ponds with wood to avoid erosion of the edge by "beaking and dabbling". If you are lucky enough to have a natural pond or stream remember to check for pollution, safe access and the riparian rights of adjacent landowners before installing your waterfowl collection.



Northern Pintail

FENCING.

Waterfowl not only need water but they have to be contained in an area and protected from predators, particularly foxes. A fox-proof fence needs to be about six feet high with an eighteen inch overhang at the top. The bottom of the fence should have an extra foot embedded in the ground. A cost efficient method is to use one inch mesh for the lower half of the fence and two inch for the upper half. The addition of electric fence wires, either mains or battery powered, placed a foot from the ground and along the top of the fence, will prevent foxes from trying to gain entry. This fence will also be reasonably effective against mink, rats, stoats and weasels. For control of these animals you will need to consult an experienced waterfowl keeper.

Although it can be costly, the erection of a well-constructed fox-proof fence will give you peace of mind knowing that your collection is safe from harm.

GROUND COVER AND ARTIFICIAL SHELTER

Plants in the enclosure provide shelter, protection and shade for the birds at all times of the year. Grass must be plentiful for the grazers, such as Wigeon and geese. Grass should be mown before it becomes too tall and rank, although clumps of tall grass and reeds are useful. Shade is essential in hot weather, either from plants or from artificial shelters. In bitter weather birds need protection from the wind. Hurdles or windbreak netting on the windward perimeter fence and at exposed spots in the enclosure will significantly reduce the wind chill factor.

NEST BOXES AND NESTING SITES

As the suggested collection contains different species, you will need to provide a range of nestboxes and nesting sites. In Spring the females will disappear, following courtship displays and mating activity. The drakes may or may not be much in evidence during the day. The Mandarin drake, in particular, can often be seen standing guard near his mate. Ganders become very protective when their geese are sitting on eggs. Avoid all possible disturbance during this time. If a nest box appears to be permanently unattractive to your birds, try re-siting it, maybe facing in a different direction.



Bar-headed goose

NESTING TIMES AND REQUIREMENTS.

European Pochard nest in April and May, Tufted ducks in May and June. Both prefer close cover - a low box or a raft. Northern Pintail nest in April and May and European Wigeon from the end of April through to June. In the wild they mainly nest in hollow trees near water. Simulate this with a box raised up on stilts above the water level. The box should be quite deep but remember to provide an access ramp outside and toe-holes inside to enable the birds to climb up to the exit hole. Mandarins like to roost on a branch overhanging the water. Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese nest from April to June, White-fronted Geese nest in May and June. It is believed that the hours of daylight and local weather conditions affect breeding times. Geese nest on the ground. Some pairs may choose to nest in plant cover or in small shelters. Put leaf mould or peat in the boxes to provide humidity. The birds will find everything else they need. Hay and straw are not recommended, as they tend to go mouldy and can be the cause of Aspergillosis infection of the lungs.

FEEDING

For such a collection of wildfowl the following feeding regime of equal amounts of wheat and layers pellets has proved successful. Breeder pellets are recommended during the breeding season. The pellets should be small to suit the smaller ducks. Feed your birds twice a day, at regular times. Give pellets in the morning, in several shallow bowls well spaced apart so that all birds get their share. Allow a handful per bird at each feed. Feed wheat in the afternoon, distributed in shallow bowls of water. Pheasant type self-feed hoppers containing wheat also work well. The smaller birds quickly learn to jump up to loosen the grain or stand around and pick up grain which falls when the larger birds are feeding.



Ringed teal

Sand or mixed grit should always be available for digestive purposes. The birds may need extra food in cold weather when wholemeal bread is a welcome addition. Waterfowl also need extra food when they are moulting, which occurs at the end of nesting. This is a very stressful time for the birds and they tend to hide and skulk in cover. The drakes of the northern hemisphere species show an "eclipse plumage" resembling that of the duck, so that they are less visible. This is essential for their survival in the wild as they are temporarily flightless.

When introducing new stock the birds should be watched carefully to check that they are getting their fair share of food.

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.