

Waterfowl Production – Special Considerations

by John Metzger

There are well over 300,000 ducks and geese grown annually for meat in the Upper Midwest, predominantly by the Hutterite Colonies in South Dakota and the surrounding states. They are grown much the same as broiler chicks – but there are differences in terms of supplying drinking water and their nutritional needs that should be considered.

Many people think that ducks and geese need swimming water to thrive. This is not true. They enjoy swimming water and can use it to cool themselves during hot weather but it is not a requirement. Over 99% of the meat ducks grown in the US have no access to swimming water.



The problems with providing swimming water is:

- 1) What do you do with that manure laden water once the ducks and geese start swimming in it? You cannot flush it into a natural waterway. You want to add it to your liquid manure system? Probably not.
- 2) How do you provide clean drinking water? Even if you lock them inside at night with water provided there, they are still getting most of their drinking water in the pond or stream during the day. Ducks and geese are susceptible to very few diseases but if one of them becomes ill with an infectious disease, all will be exposed very quickly if they are in swimming water.
- 3) If you do need to medicate quickly in water, how will you do this if all the birds are outside drinking pond water?
- 4) If your birds are outside, how will you protect them from wild ducks or birds that may bring Avian Influenza? They will probably not get sick but can be a carrier to other birds. Open water attracts wild ducks. Wild ducks may carry AI.



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Will your birds be prettier with swimming water? Yes, but the above problems easily outweigh the beauty benefit. So what is recommended?

You can provide water in troughs, red bell waterers or nipples to your ducks. Our recommendation is nipple waterers for two main reasons – your birds are always getting clean water and there is less water spilled and wasted in the building.



You should supply one nipple for every seven ducks. We have used chicken nipples for the past 30 years and have only recently installed nipples designed for waterfowl - so you don't need a specially designed nipple for ducks.

The only time we provide open water for our ducks is for the first five days of their life. We use the Cyclone Bid-die Drinker and plug it into the nipple line. We supply one of these for every 40 ducklings. Starting on day three we remove one third



of the waterers each day so by the end of day five they only have nipple waterers. As with chicks, the ducklings are attracted to the shiny nipple or the water on the nipple and quickly begin using the nipple waterer. As you remove the fountain waterers, the ducklings do not crowd around the remaining waterers. They are very comfortable drinking from the nipples and will drink from whatever water source is closer.

We also recommend raising the waterers so the ducklings cannot get in them. This can be as simple as using a piece of 2x8 lumber with nails around the perimeter to prevent the waterer from being pushed off the lumber.

As with chicks, you must raise the nipple lines as the birds grow. You want them to reach up to drink. If the nipples are too low, there will more water in the litter as the water will be going out the side of their bill when they drink. When they are actively growing, this will be a daily adjustment.



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We recommend a regular protocol in place to sanitize the water lines in your building. As most producers have a proportional medicator hooked up to their water lines, it is fairly simple to also sanitize the lines. This can be done while the birds are drinking the water.

Our procedure is to sanitize with PWT (Poultry Water Treatment) for four days a week and CID 2000 for three days a week. Both are set at a proportional mix of one part of stock solution with 128 gallons of fresh water. The is used to the water and the is used to the water lines. Is this required? No, but we feel that if we can provide cleaner water for our birds, it will increase their production – whether that is meat or eggs.

Nipple lines can be set directly above the bedding in your building and this will work very well. But if you want to reduce the moisture in your pen even more, you can install pits and a scraper under your waterers. When we installed pits under our nipple waterers, we reduced our shaving usage by 70%. You will produce about 200 gallons of liquid manure per 1000 ducks per week. If you have do not have a way to handle this liquid manure, this system may not work for you. But if you are producing liquid manure elsewhere on your farm, this system will work very well for you.

Ducks require a slightly different nutritional program. Ducks do not do well with mash feed. If you feed mash only to your ducks, they will grow, but there will be much more feed wastage as they typically take a mouthful of feed to their water and add water to make it easier to swallow. Feed is lost in the water or bedding when they do this. Therefore, the recommendation is to feed crumbles or a very small pellet for their starter feed and then a larger pellet once they go to a grower feed at about three weeks of age. As with pelleting feed for other poultry, the pelleting process sterilizes the feed due to the steam required for pellet formation.

The other two items that should be recognized for waterfowl is their need for increased niacin and their higher susceptibility to mycotoxins than chickens or turkeys. Waterfowl require 60ppm of niacin. If they have inadequate amounts of niacin (vitamin B3), leg problems will develop within several weeks. Legs will be bowed and the birds will quickly become crippled.

Elevated levels of mycotoxins can cause a multitude of problems from stunted growth, to leg problems, to higher mortality. Using clean feed is necessary and the addition of binders, mold inhibitors, biotransformants and/or bioprotection additives are also recommended. Speak to your nutritionist about this but common additives are.

The production of ducks and geese is not a difficult process and typically much easier than chickens or turkeys. But management is a different in a few ways. If you are prepared for these differences, you should have great success in raising waterfowl for meat in the Upper Midwest.

