

2010 Gamebird eZine

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IT SEEMS TO ME ...I Love Ducks

Ducks (and geese) are usually very easy to raise. They have several things going for them:

- ✓ They are to many, the cutest little guys around. They have a sweet look about them that makes all who knows them fall in love with them. Many years ago when I hatched my first ducks I was amazed that such a large chick could come out of such a small egg. Besides that, their head was so big that I just could not figure how it alone could fit into the shell. But fit it did! I lost my heart when these just dried off ducklings followed me around the pen. They were imprinted to me as I was the first voice they heard and the first one they saw. Now they were truly mine.
- ✓ They are resistant to many of the more common gamebird diseases that affect “upland” types. Their constitution is tough from day one. Ducklings will eat most any kind of food. They are not particular at what they eat and the keeper has to be careful that they have the proper amount of protein and vegetable matter in their diets as they seem to not know how to balance their own diet.

- ✓ They are weather hardy in the winter as long as they are feathered out. The youngsters do need some type of heat until they grow their feathers but after that they can take any amount of cold as long as they have open water to swim in. If they do not have open water, their feet will freeze often.
- ✓ In summer, they cannot take very high temperatures (unless they can swim in water) and definitely need shade to keep cool. This is not true when we look at the “tropical” species of ducks that are accustomed to hot and humid weather.
- ✓ They can be raised in any climate with some precautions. I have raised ducks in Montana, South Texas , and in between.

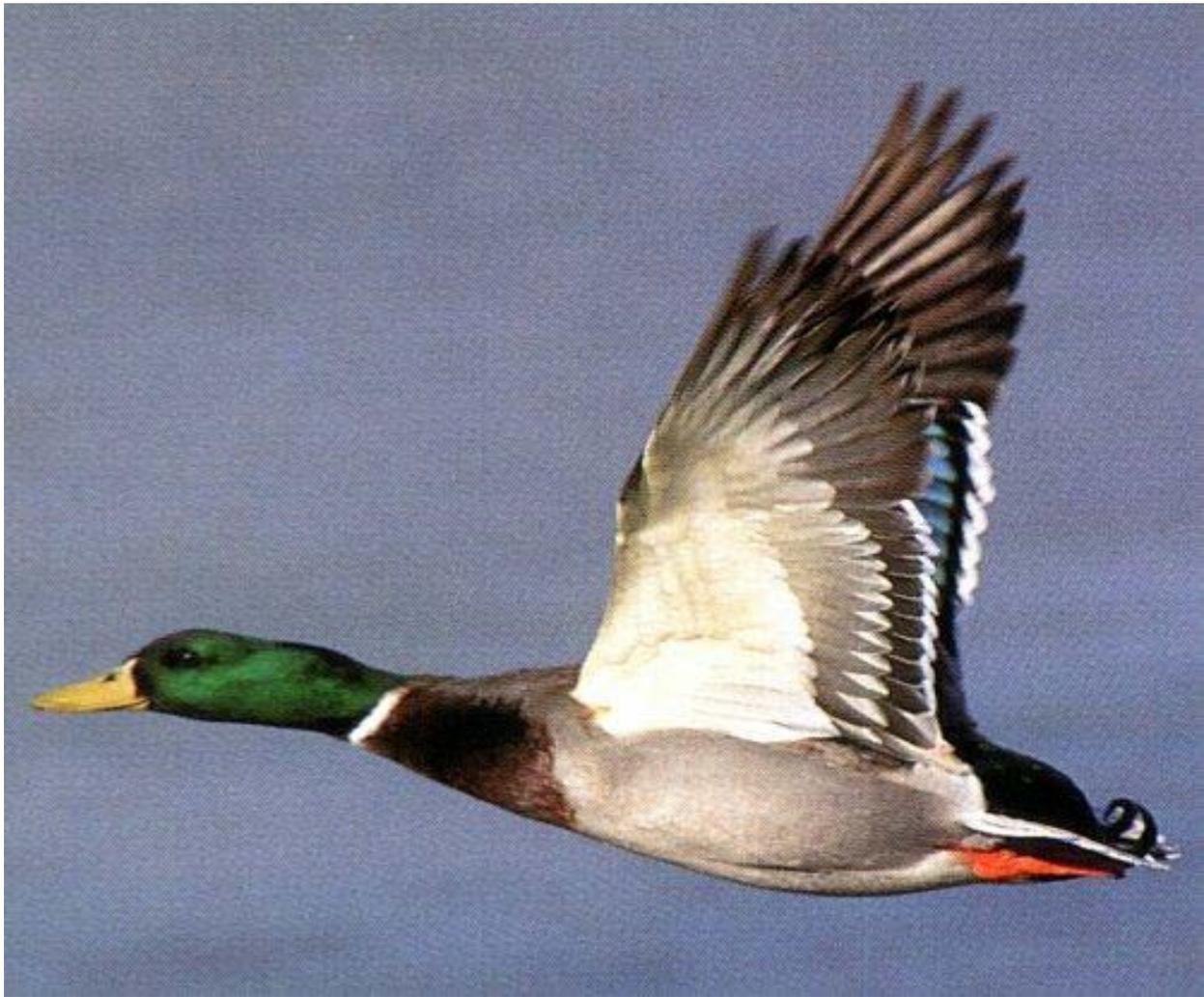
Some drawbacks to raising ducks:

- ✓ They are very messy as their droppings are very wet from drinking lots of water. Breeders have designed special brooding units that allows them to take baths and are easy to keep clean.
- ✓ As I said above, they do need special treatment in extreme weather conditions.
- ✓ They are somewhat noisy and will disturb neighbors especially during breeding season. Some ducks (Muscovy) have no voice and make good city dwellers. As a boy I had three of these special Muscovy ducks (*Cairina moschata*) which were a part of our family and made good friends. They lived outdoors and caused no problems.

Waterfowl have always been a fascination to me. They are the most frequently depicted birds in ancient history art, have always been hunted, and several species have thrived under domestication for many centuries. (Roger Tory Peterson)

There are approximately 160 species of ducks, geese and swans that have been classified. Since some of these are close to extinction, it behooves the breeder to learn how to propagate these species for future generations.

I Love Ducks!



A Mallard Drake (Greenhead) in flight

The Mallard Duck

(*Anas platyrhynchos*)

The green head and yellow bill of the mallard duck is a familiar sight to many people living in the Northern hemisphere. In fact, the mallard is thought to be the most abundant and wide-ranging duck on Earth.

Mallards prefer calm, shallow sanctuaries, but can be found in almost any body of freshwater across Asia, Europe, and North America. They're also found in saltwater and brackish water and are commonly found in wetlands.

The male, or drake, is the more distinctively colored of the mallards. Its iconic green head sits atop a white neckband that sets off a chestnut-colored chest and gray body. Females are mottled drab brown in color, but sport iridescent purple-blue wing feathers that are visible as a patch on their sides. They grow to about 26 inches (65 centimeters) in length and can weigh up to 3 pounds (1.4 kilograms).

Mallard groups can often be seen head dipping or completely upending in the water. They rarely dive though, spending their time near the surface and dabbling for invertebrates, fish, amphibians, and a variety of plants. They also graze on land, feeding on grains and plants.

Mated pairs migrate to and breed in the northern parts of their range and build nests on the ground or in a protected cavity. They normally lay about a dozen eggs, and the incubation period lasts just under a month. Mallards are territorial during much of this period, but once incubation is well underway, males abandon the nest and join a flock of other males.

Most mallard species are common and not considered threatened. However one threat to their populations includes hybridization with other ducks (National Geographic Magazine)

Raising Ducks –Basics

Small groups of ducklings can be brooded by broody chicken hens and most breeds of ducks. If the ducklings aren't hatched by the broody female, place them under her at night so that she will more readily accept them.



Ducklings can be brooded artificially in about the same way as baby chicks. Due to their rapid growth, ducklings will need heat a shorter period of time, and floor space requirements will increase more rapidly.

Any small building or garage or barn corner can be used as a brooding area for small numbers of birds. The brooding area should be dry, reasonably well lighted and ventilated, and free from drafts. Cover the floor with about 4 inches of absorbent litter material, such as wood shavings, chopped straw, or peat moss. Litter dampness is more of a problem with ducks than with chicks. Good litter management will require removal of wet spots and frequent addition of clean, dry litter. Be sure litter is free of mold.

Infrared heat lamps are a convenient source of heat for brooding small numbers of birds. Use one 250-watt lamp for 30 ducklings. Heat lamps

provide radiant heat to the birds under them. Since the air isn't heated, room temperature measurement isn't so important.

When using hover-type brooders, brood only half as many ducklings as the rated chick capacity. Because ducklings are larger than chicks in size, it may be necessary to raise the hover 3 to 4 inches. Have the temperature at the edge of the hover 85 to 90 degrees F when the ducklings arrive. Reduce it 5 to 10 degrees per week.

Confine the birds to the heated area with a corrugated paper chick guard for the first 3 to 4 days. Watch the actions of the birds as a clue to their comfort. If they are too hot, they will move away from the heat. If too cold they may pile up and be noisy.

High temperatures may result in slower feathering and growth. Supplementary heat may be needed for 5 to 6 weeks in cold weather; in summer, only 2 to 3 weeks. By 4 weeks of age, the ducklings should be feathered enough to be outdoors except in extremely cold, wet weather. In some areas attention to predator control may be necessary when the ducklings are turned out.

Allow 1/2 square foot of floor space per bird during the first two weeks. Increase this to at least 1 square foot by 4 weeks. If the birds are to remain confined after the first month, provide them with at least 2 square feet of floor space.

Feeding

Ducklings should have feed and drinking water available when they are started under the brooder or hen. Use waterers the birds can't get into. This is especially important in the brooding area since ducklings are easily chilled when they become wet while still in the "down" stage. Pans or troughs with wire guards are satisfactory. Place waterers over low, wire-covered frames to help reduce wet litter problems. Change waterers or adjust size as birds grow. The waterer should be wide enough and deep enough for a bird to dip its bill and head.

In some areas commercial suppliers have feeds formulated for duck feeding. Check with the suppliers in your vicinity. If duck feeds aren't available, start ducklings on chick starter for the first 2 to 3 weeks. Place feed

for the first few days on egg case flats or other rough paper: slick-surfaced paper may cause leg injuries. After 2 to 3 weeks ducklings can be fed a pelleted chicken grower ration plus cracked corn, or other grain. Keep feed before the birds at all times and provide grower-size insoluble grit. Less feed wastage and better feed efficiency result from using crumbled or pelleted feeds.

Ducks are easy to raise because they are hardy and not susceptible to many of the common poultry diseases. The use of medicated feeds isn't usually necessary. Very few additives have been approved for nutritional or medicinal use in duck feeds. Waterfowl may be more sensitive to some drugs than other poultry. Incorrect use of certain medicated feeds formulated for chickens and turkeys could harm ducklings.

Small flocks of ducklings raised in the late spring with access to green feed outdoors generally have few nutritional problems. While ducks are not as good foragers as geese, they do eat some green feed and farm flocks are usually allowed to run at large. Cut green feed can be supplied to the birds when they must be kept inside in bad weather. Water for swimming isn't necessary for successful duck production.

Breeder Flock Management

Select stock from flocks hatched in April and May. Using males from early flocks will help insure their readiness for mating for the start of the following year. Choose vigorous birds with good weight, conformation, and feathering before marketing the young flock. Keep one male for each 5 to 6 females. Young birds should be selected only from families with good egg production, hatchability, and fertility records.

Identification of males and females is necessary when selecting birds for breeder flocks and for exhibition. Even in breeds that have a sex-differentiated color pattern, both sexes may resemble each other in their summer plumage. In some breeds mature males develop characteristic curled feathers at the base of the tail. After about 6 weeks of age, the sounds ducks make can be a clue to their sex. Females have a more definite sharp quack, while males have a sound which is not nearly so loud or harsh but more of a muffled sound.

Birds held for breeders must be kept from becoming too fat. The breeder-developer ration fed during the holding period should contain less energy than starter and grower rations. If the grower ration is continued during the holding period, gradually restrict feed to about 70 percent of the amount fed at the start.

Change to a breeder-laying ration about 1 month before egg production starts. Don't bring birds into production before 7 months of age. Feeding oyster shell is optional to improve eggshell quality. Increasing day length with lighting stimulates egg production. Provide a 14-hour day 3 weeks before the desired egg production date. The flock should be laying at a high rate of production within 5 to 6 weeks.

Provide breeders with a clean, dry, well-ventilated shed or house. Allow 5 to 6 feet of floor space per bird. Birds are often confined at night to get a maximum number of eggs and then allowed daytime access to the yard. Provide floor level nest boxes. Most eggs are laid in early morning. Gather eggs about 7 a.m. and let the birds out of the house.

Soiled eggs should be cleaned soon after gathering. They should be washed in warm water (at least 20 degrees F warmer than the eggs) containing an egg cleaning and sanitizing compound used according to the manufacturer's instructions. Store eggs for hatching at 55 degrees F and a relative humidity of 75 percent. Eggs stored longer than 2 weeks may decline in hatchability. If stored more than a week, turn eggs daily to prevent yolks from sticking to shells.

Incubation

A chicken hen or female duck can set on 9 to 11 duck eggs. Place the nest where it won't be disturbed during the incubation period and provide a convenient source of feed and water. The nest should be checked at hatching time. Remove early hatching ducklings as soon as they hatch and place them under a brooder or heat lamp. This may prevent the hen from leaving the nest before completion of hatch or trampling some of the young if she becomes restless.

When using an incubator for duck eggs, follow the manufacturer's instructions for the machine being used. Turn the eggs 3 to 5 times daily until

3 days before they hatch. Some growers try to maintain a slightly higher incubator humidity for duck eggs than chicken eggs, especially during the hatching time. Sprinkling duck eggs with lukewarm water twice a week up to the 25th day has been helpful in some instances; others have had good success without sprinkling. Keep track of any modifications you make in your incubation procedures so you can evaluate them properly and adopt those that are most likely to increase the success of your operation.

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