

# 2010 Gamebird eZine

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## IT SEEMS TO ME ... I Love Geese

The sounds of a flock of Canada geese is awesome! There is just nothing quite like it in nature.

Waterfowl (anseriformes) have fascinated mankind from the time of early history whether because of their sheer beauty, or from the mystery of migration, or from many other perspectives. Probably waterfowl have been studied more than any other group of birds through the years. These are primarily birds of the wetlands, from the marshes of the Arctic tundra to tropical-rainforest swamps, and they may be found in open sea to high mountain lakes.

Many bird breeders have specialized in Waterfowl and have spent a lifetime raising them for various reasons. They would say to the observer who remarks, "I see you have waterfowl!" The breeder answers, "No, I don't have waterfowl -- they have me!" And that is the way it is with these marvelous birds. They have a way of capturing hearts and minds of those who know them well.

Perhaps it is their extreme "trust" of man that many have. There is nothing more enjoyable than having tame birds that want to relate to their owner, even if it is just to get a treat fed by hand. And, we who know them well, love their personality. They are clowns, possessive bullies, and just about everything else you can think of. This endears them to me and hundreds of breeders across the world.

All of the above makes me love them, but I like their hardiness. They are not apt to catch the more common poultry diseases which plague upland gamebird breeders. They do have certain weaknesses but none that cannot be controlled by the observant breeder.

As I now think of the geese that I have known through the past years, my heart beats faster and I find myself longing for my adventures with them again.

I love Geese!



*1990 Duck Stamp*

# Raising Geese - Basics

**Melvin L. Hamre**

## Brooding Goslings

A special building is not required for brooding small numbers of geese. Any small building or a corner of a garage or barn can be used as a brooding area for a small flock if it is dry, reasonably well-lighted and ventilated, and free from drafts. Cover the floor with 4 inches of absorbent litter material, such as wood shavings, chopped straw, or peat moss. Maintaining good litter requires frequent stirring, removal of wet spots, and periodic addition of clean, dry litter. Be sure litter is free from mold.

Heat lamps are a convenient source of radiant heat for brooding small flocks. Use one 250-watt lamp for each 25 goslings.

When using hover-type brooders, brood only about one-third as many goslings as the rated chick capacity of the hover. Because goslings are larger in size, with some brooders it may be necessary to raise the hover 3-4 inches higher than for baby chicks. Have the temperature at the edge of the hover 85 to 90 degrees F when the goslings arrive. Reduce the temperature to 5 to 10 degrees per week until 70 degrees F is reached.

Confine the birds to the heated area for the first 3 or 4 days with a corrugated paper or wire mesh fence. The behavior of the birds is an indication of their comfort: they will move away from the heat source if they are too warm, or may crowd together at corners or under the brooder if too cold. If there is no light at the heat source, a dim light on the birds at night tends to discourage crowding.

High temperatures may result in slower feathering and growth. Heat is usually not needed after the fifth or sixth week, and in good weather, the young geese can be placed on pasture. In warm weather, goslings can be let outdoors even at 2 weeks, but must be sheltered from rain. They must be kept dry to prevent losses from crowding and chilling while in the "down" stage.

Allow at least 1/2 square foot of floor space per bird at the start of the brooding period. Increase this to 1 square foot by 2 weeks. If birds are to

remain confined due to inclement weather, be sure additional floor space is provided as they increase in size.

## Feeding Geese

Goslings should have feed and drinking water when they are started under the brooder or hen. Use waterers the birds can't get into to prevent losses from chilling. Waterers should be wide and deep enough for the bird to dip both bill and head. Pans or troughs with wire guards are satisfactory. They should be placed over screened platforms to aid in keeping litter dry. Change waterers or adjust size as birds grow.

Feeds formulated for goose feeding programs are not normally available from commercial suppliers.

Goslings can be started on a crumbled or pelleted chick starter. Place feed the first few days on egg case flats or other rough paper. Use the same type of feeders as used for chicks, changing type or adjusting size as the birds grow. Keep feed before the birds at all times and provide insoluble grit. After the first 2-3 weeks, a pelleted chick grower ration can be fed, supplemented with a cracked grain.

Geese are quite hardy and not susceptible to many of the common poultry diseases so medicated feed is not generally necessary. ***Certain coccidiostats used in starting and growing mashes may cause lameness or even death in goslings.***

Geese are excellent foragers. Good succulent pasture or lawn clippings can be provided as early as the first week. By the time the birds are 5-6 weeks old, a good share of their feed can be from forage. Geese can be very selective and tend to pick out the palatable forages. They will reject alfalfa and narrow-leaved tough grasses and select more succulent clovers, bluegrass, orchard grass, timothy, and brome grass. Geese can't be grown satisfactorily on dried-out, mature pasture. Corn or pea silage can be fed if available.

An acre of pasture will support 20-40 birds, depending on the size of the geese and pasture quality. A 3-foot woven wire fence will ordinarily confine the geese to the grazing area. Be sure that the pasture areas and green feed have not had any chemical treatment that may be harmful to the birds. The birds should be provided shade in hot weather.

Although supplemental grain feeding of goslings is often continued after they have been established on good pasture, many flocks are raised on green feed alone during the pasture period. Geese to be marketed should be fed a turkey finishing or similar ration for 3-4 weeks before processing. Any birds saved for breeding stock should not be fattened.

Considerable attention has been given to the use of common geese to control weeds in cotton, strawberries, and some truck crops. Development of more selective herbicides is reducing this practice. The problems in coordination of bird supply and management with weed and crop growth make goose weeding rather impractical for most producers.

### Breeder Flock Management

It is difficult to distinguish sex in geese except by examination of the reproductive organs. The process, described by the late T. H. Canfield, follows: Lift the goose by the neck and lay it on its back, either on a table or over your bended knee, with the tail pointed away from you. Move the tail end of the bird out over the edge so it can be readily bent downwards. Then insert your pointer finger (sometimes it helps to have a little vaseline on it) into the cloaca about half an inch and move it around in a circular manner several times to enlarge and relax the sphincter muscle which closes the opening. Next, apply some pressure directly below and on the sides of the vent to evert or expose the sex organs.

In some birds the male organ is somewhat difficult to unsheath. An inexperienced sexer may easily call a bird a female if, after slight pressure, the cork-screw-like male organ is not exposed. However, only the presence of a female genital eminence will positively identify a female.

Geese do not do well if enclosed in a house. They should be confined to a yard with a house for shelter protection during winter storms. When green pasture is not available, breeders can be maintained on roughage such as leafy clover or alfalfa hay, corn or pea silage, with a small amount of grain. If breeding stock becomes overly fat, poor fertility and hatchability may result.

Eggs should be gathered twice daily, especially during cold weather. They should be stored at 55 degrees F and a relative humidity of 75 percent until set for hatching. Eggs should not be held for more than 7-10 days, and should be turned daily if kept more than a few days.

The incubation period for eggs of most breeds of farm flock geese varies from 29-31 days. Four to six eggs can be incubated under a setting hen and 10-12 under a goose. Mark the eggs so that they can be turned by hand twice daily if the setting hen does not turn them. Better hatchability is reported by some growers if the eggs are lightly sprinkled or dipped in lukewarm water for half a minute daily during the last half of the incubation period. Remove goslings from the nest as they hatch, and keep them in a warm place until the youngest are several hours old. Since it takes some time to complete the hatch, if the goslings aren't removed as hatched, the hen may desert the nest leaving with the hatched goslings before the hatch is completed.

Goose eggs can be hatched in either still-air or forced-draft incubators. Follow the instructions from the machine's manufacturer. You may increase the success of your hatching operation if you can talk with a person who has had success with machine incubation of goose eggs.

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# Raising Canada Geese

Note: This is an article that I wrote some years back that I had forgotten about, but found it on the Web. I wrote it after I had raised 5 Maxima Canada goslings.

I agree with George Allen, Jr. the former editor of the Gazette when he said that some of his favorite birds were the more common ones. This is true for me especially when I think about geese. Perhaps it is because of the thousands out in the wild or perhaps these were my first geese to get as a young man -I do not know - but I love Canada geese.

There are several subspecies of the nominate family. The main difference is size and coloration and geographical location. I personally love the Giant Canada goose, especially those with the bright white on their head. But then as I think about it, I love the little Cacklers with the rose color on their breasts. Canada geese are undoubtedly one of my favorite geese.

## Managing the Breeding Pairs

If you have several pairs of these geese you will need to think seriously about having several separate pens. You should have 1) separate breeding pen or pens, 2) wintering pens, 3) large general holding pen. Having these pens will really make life easier as your flock grows. This is especially true during the breeding season. Most agree that separate breeding pens make for higher production. Records are easier kept, the ganders fight less, and servicing the pen can be systemized. However, this is not to say that raising Canada geese in large colony type pens is not successful. Once the breeding pairs settle down and have their territory staked out things get quiet.

## Breeding

Several types of nesting sites can be used with these geese. One is made by placing three bales of straw to form a triangle with a depression in the middle. About six inches of loose straw is placed in this depression for the geese to use. Another nesting site commonly used is the wooden structure. This is about four feet high and is three by three feet with some sort of windows near the top to let in light. The front is open with only the roof and the sides closed in.

One year old geese show little response to breeding. They will develop pair bonding if allowed to do so. However, the second year most geese will begin to think about breeding. Planned matings can sometimes work if the single gander and female are penned together but most of the success comes from one and two year old birds.

More young can be raised if the first clutch is taken away from the parents and they are allowed to have a second clutch. Production is more than doubled by using this method of management. It is reported that first year layers seldom lay a second clutch but after that most all will do so if conditions are right.

Gathering the eggs can be dangerous for the keeper. The Giant Canada geese are very large and will defend their nests with much vigor. They will attack intruders especially if they do not know them. Most advise that only one or two people work with the flock as the geese become accustomed to the keepers. When gathering eggs it is a good idea to have a helper to distract the defending pair while the other slips in and gathers the eggs. Eggs are gathered daily with the first two replaced with plastic or plaster dummy eggs. When the goose finishes her clutch she covers the nest with straw. She begins to incubate. When all of the eggs are gathered a piece of plywood should be placed over the nest to cover it for three or four days until the goose loses her urge to incubate. After that the plywood can be removed and she will commence to rebuild her nest and hopefully lay a second clutch. If a second clutch is desired it is best not to let the goose get too far along in her incubation cycle.

Eggs can be artificially incubated or the second clutch at least can be left for the parents to incubate. If they are good parents the goslings can be raised by them or they can be taken to artificially brood.

## Raising the Goslings

The wonderful thing about geese is they are easy to brood and raise. You can use any type of brooder box that you like and still have success. My Assembly Line Method of raising gamebirds works just fine with geese. The size of the box needs to be adjusted to fit the size of the birds. You can build your brooder box large enough to accommodate the entire clutch of goslings and raise them in a group with no trouble.

Raising goslings is not difficult if they are not given too much protein. If more protein is given than they can tolerate their legs go and they will not make it. One of the secrets to raising geese is to give them plenty of greens. They love grass and can grow rapidly and healthy on just a diet of good fresh grass. If you do not have any grass to give them they will appreciate getting lettuce or any other green food. Usually, when the goslings hatch out there is winter grass everywhere that can be pulled and fed to them. If your pens are so arranged to let the goslings out on a lawn so much the better. They will graze and be perfectly content. I raised five Giant Canada geese in Oregon and was amazed to see how much greens they consumed. Luckily they were on about a quarter acre of fast growing clover which they trashed after about a month. It is best to give them some type of low-protein crumbles to supplement the grass diet.

## Wintering

Most goose breeders agree that the wintering period is very important as the birds need to come through the winter in good condition for the following breeding season.

Canada geese are hardy and require less heat than most other game birds. In Northern latitudes shelters placed to face the South can be made to keep the geese out of the deep snow and cold winds. These shelters can be made from any material that is available. The shelter area should have clean mold-free straw for the birds to bed down in. This can be cleaned out periodically. This wintering pen should have a source of fresh, open water available for all of the birds. Although open water is not necessary, it gives the geese a chance to bathe and keep their feathers in good condition to ward off the cold. Some sort of heating system will need to be used in cold climates to keep the water open during cold spells.

The watering system should be designed for easy draining and cleaning when the water becomes fouled. The size of the water pond and the number of birds will determine how often it needs to be cleaned. Some breeders design a drainage system which can easily be used to get the water out without disturbing the birds.

Good feed should be used during the winter. Whole grains such as corn, barley, wheat, oats and millet are satisfactory. Give extra portions of shelled

corn during times of stress. It is advisable to supplement the diet with some type of green forage. Alfalfa can be used but care should be taken to get hay which is free from mold and is not steamy. Some sort of hay trough should be designed to keep the hay off of the ground . Sand and grit should be available at all times to help their digestion.

Writing this article makes me want to get some of these wonderful geese again. They have a great personality and will inter-relate with their keeper. As a matter of fact mine became pests when they wanted to be fed by nipping me on my leg. This became a problem as my legs got all bruised up from their bites. I stopped this by doing what they wanted - feeding them!

If you want to get some geese, try one of the subspecies of the Canada. You will enjoy them and get some valuable experience to raise some of the more delicate geese later.

