ISSUE 140
March/April 2024

APPPA *Grit*

American Pastured Poultry Producers Association Newsletter

IN THIS ISSUE...

Demystifying Ducks

—Ben Grimes

Ducks are an enigma in the pastured poultry community. We have chicken systems down pat, and many of us produce more than 10,000 chickens a year on fresh pasture. But producing even a few ducks can be a wrench in the spokes because they have idiosyncrasies that chickens do not. However, that does not mean they are difficult to raise. I would wager that in many ways they are easier than a chicken. In this article, I share my experience raising Pekin ducks in central North Carolina in the hopes I can help demystify the experience and put you on the path of a successful duck enterprise.

Why ducks? Ducks are a great addition to a thriving pastured poultry operation. Much of the same infrastructure and experience translates directly from species to species. Ducks are much more tolerant to cold, wet, and hot conditions than chickens. So, you can extend your season of production into the shoulders and get even more use out of your current infrastructure. While there are certainly opportunities for retail direct to consumer, the real gem of ducks is in the wholesale to restaurants outlet. Opposite of our conditioning that chicken is the cheap protein, duck is perceived as a high dollar luxury. A chef can put duck on the menu and get top dollar from the diner. That top dollar means they can pay you, the farmer, a premium for your product.

But, as many of us know, ducks are not without their challenges. The two main challenges that producers face are water and processing. Some of the challenges can be fixed with the right equipment and skills. And some of them require a mindset tweak for success. Overcoming these challenges may provide your business with excellent growth opportunities for both new customers and the ability to sell existing customers a new product.

Anyone who has slick systems for producing chickens and has dabbled with ducks will know that chicken systems and experience are not directly translatable to ducks. While much of it is the same, the two species have a few drastically different characteristics. The most apparent is that chickens are dry, and ducks are wet. From day one in the

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 1)

brooder, they will make a mess of your house. This is where good systems help, but mindset is more important.

Even as ducklings they are obsessed with water, and if given the chance, they will swim. In nature, this is fine as mother duck will ensure they stay dry and warm. But I do not give access to swimming in the brooder as they will often get hypothermic. To provide adequate water without giving them access to swimming at this age I primarily use nipple water lines with the activator cups. I also have more access to water for ducklings than I do for chickens.

Nipple water lines without the activator cup are ok, but a duck's ability to dip their beaks to filter out solids is part of their nature. If given the choice between the nipple and an activator cup, they will primarily choose the activator cup.

Ducks will make a mess around their water. One component of brooding ducks is to use more bedding than you would use for a chicken. But keep in mind that even a duckling evolved to be in water and on muddy banks. Even if the brooder looks far too mucky to me, I find that the ducklings are content so long as they are able to keep themselves clean. If their feathers start showing visible signs of muck then added bedding is essential.

While it may be bothersome for you to look at, it does not bother the duck. If you try to keep the bedding as clean and dry as you do for a chicken, you will drive yourself mad. Instead, I find that it's best to accept the duck for what it is and allow a certain level of muck. If you try to keep your ducks in the brooder beyond 2.5 weeks, you will simply be unable to contain the mess. Ducks can go out into pasture much sooner, with less protection than is needed for a chicken.

In pasture, ducks can handle colder temperatures, wind, rain, ice, and snow. If given the chance, they will intentionally expose themselves to even the coldest of rains as an opportunity to bathe and clean themselves. Outside of a cold, wet rain that lasts for several days they do not need shelter other than shade in hot weather. I raise my ducks in electronet and utilize pastures with lots of tree cover.

Water in the field is also a consideration. They will consume copious amounts of water and make a mess around their water access. Most of my water systems were taken directly from Luke Groce's systems in Indiana and Timberfeast in Illinois. By their recommendation I have a chain of Kane waterers on a float valve. One waterer for every 100 birds up to 5-6 weeks.

At 5-6 weeks of age I add a cement mixing bowl or horse feeding trough with a float valve. Before that age I found that the ducks tend to get stuck and will sometimes drown in the basin. Once I attach the basin to their string of Kane waterers, I put a block or

(Continued on page 6)

Ben Grimes shares a picture of his pastured duck water setup.

(Continued from page 4)
large stone on the bottom. This gives them something to stand on, so they can get out of the trough easily and prevent drowning.

I add one of these basins per 200 ducks in addition to the Kane waterers. They all run on a chain of hoses and connection valves that I move daily to a new spot within the electronet. They will get very muddy but the float valve system easily allows me to empty and clean the waterers.

Both of these systems ensure adequate water amounts for ducks and give them access to dunk their beaks. The larger tubs also give the birds access to swimming and cleaning. They will use it even when temperatures hover at freezing. Access to swimming is not essential, but they absolutely appreciate it.

In warmer temperatures you will see better growth if they have access to swimming water. I have seen ducks successfully produced on nipple water lines alone. It is my unproven hunch that this is fine in cooler temperatures, but when it is hotter and the ducks require more water, this would not suffice their high water needs. In addition, I would not recommend a pond or other open water source because you may have trouble retrieving them when you need them for processing.

When it comes to processing, the right tools, systems and mindset will set you up for success. However, the age of the duck is critical. We always process our pekin ducks at 7-8 weeks when the ducks are going through a molt and there will be no pin feathers. If you push beyond this stage, you will have pin feathers and all the right tools and systems will not be able to remove them. You will have to resort to wax.

There is a second molt window between 11-14 weeks, but I find this age is much harder to process and not worth the weight gain.

We process on farm and use a Poultry Man scalder and plucker. For ducks, our scalder is set at 142 degrees Fahrenheit and scald for 2 minutes and 45 seconds. We then pluck with full water on for 3 minutes. As you could imagine, if you processed a chicken this way it would be torn to shreds. But a duck can take an absolute beating in the plucker. And this is one area where a duck can be easier than a chicken - because you have a huge margin of error.

I have also heard great success stories from those who alternate between scalding, dry plucking, and wet plucking. I have not experimented with this technique, so I won't speak to it. But I acknowledge it here because it may be a superior technique to what I describe above.

After the plucker you should have a mostly clean duck. There should be some fluff, especially around the groin and wings, but there should be no pin feathers. Pin feathers mean that the duck was not processed during the correct window. Our general rule of thumb is that each duck should get special attention post pluck of about 30 seconds. This is time that we spend making sure that as much of the fluff as possible gets removed. Usually, a gentle sweeping of the fingers in trouble spots is all that it takes to clear this fluff.

Over the years we have tried many tools, catfish skinners, oyster knives and even a specially designed blow torch to remove the feathers. But in the end, we have found our fingers to be the most successful tool.

My ducks primarily go to restaurants. For their purposes they want a clean breast because they will sear and serve that as is. So most of our attention is on the breast. Chefs don't care if there is a bit of feather here and there on other parts because they are going to confit the rest of the duck and the feathers will not be noticeable.

While these systems allow us to efficiently process ducks, we also must accept that ducks are just not going to be as clean as a chicken. There are always going to be some feathers. If you want to eliminate all feathers, you can wax them. However, that is a tedious and messy step which we choose to abstain from. Instead, we do our best to ensure a clean

breast and accept the imperfections of the duck everywhere else. This is a happy balance that we have found works for us, and we believe is translatable to others across the country. If you are using a third-party processor, you may have processing limitations both in the number of ducks they take or limit the available processing times. They may refuse to process ducks at all. If you are lucky enough to be in driving distance of a good processor, especially one that will take ducks, then consider yourself fortunate!

While challenges exist, they are simultaneously the reason why ducks are so hardy and resilient. It is precisely their love of water that enables them to handle the elements so much better than a chicken. That love and need for water makes them resistant to plucking but ensures they can take a beating in the plucker. In the end, their hardy attributes contribute to the incredible flavor and fat which consumers and chefs love. With the right systems and mindset, ducks can be a great addition to a pastured poultry enterprise.

Ben Grimes runs Dawnbreaker Farms and Carolina Pastures in the Piedmont area of central North Carolina. He has been farming since 2013, and raising and processing ducks since 2018. During his learning phase he ruined several hundred ducks trying to figure out how to pluck them. Somehow the customer Ben processed for kept having faith in him and continued to send him ducks until he and his amazing team eventually worked it out. Ben now freely shares this information with anyone who will listen in the hopes to learn from his mistakes and come to enjoy and appreciate the joys, frustrations, and immense opportunities that come with ducks.