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Homestead Duck and Goose Production

From Jack Widmer's Practical Animal Husbandry, here's an article on duck and goose production, breeding, feeding, home-grown goslings and ducklings, etc.



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Back in 1949 — before factory farming and the "pump 'em full of chemicals" school of agriculture blitzed the country — a fellow named Jack Widmer wrote a little book called *PRACTICAL ANIMAL HUSBANDRY*. Now that manual wasn't what you'd call completely exhaustive, the writing style wasn't the best and a few of the ideas it advanced — such as confining laying hens in cages — were later refined into the kind of automated farming that so many of us are fighting against these days.

Still, *PRACTICAL ANIMAL HUSBANDRY* contained a good deal of basic information that today's "homesteaders" all too often need and don't know where to find. I'm pleased, then, that the publisher of the book, Charles Scribner's Sons, has granted me permission to reprint excerpts from this out-of-print manual. I think that many of my readers will find the following information both interesting and informative. — MOTHER.

Excerpts from *PRACTICAL ANIMAL HUSBANDRY* by Jack Widmer are reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons. Copyright 1949 by Charles Scribner's Sons.

» DUCK PRODUCTION

Ducks are much easier to raise than chickens or turkeys. They are subject to few diseases, are sturdy enough to live through a more variable brooding temperature than other fowl, and if given half a chance will weigh from five to six pounds at eleven weeks, an ideal butchering age for that delicacy of delicacies, Roast Long Island Duckling. Their feeding is a simple matter, their feeds easily mixed, and the amateur agriculturist will have more encouraging results from ducks than he will from most members of the home barnyard.

True, it is almost essential for breeding ducks to have access to some sort of water in which they may swim during the breeding season for egg fertility is tremendously increased if they have a good swimming hole; but this can be supplied by either streams, lakes, or man-made pools that need not be very large to accommodate all the ducks that the average family will require for home consumption. In the event that a swimming hole is not practical, then the country dweller may purchase day-old ducklings and fatten them without swimming facilities.

Ducks do not require elaborate housing arrangements (four square feet per breeding duck is sufficient . . . three square feet for fattening birds) and barrels, packing crates or other waste material make excellent nesting boxes. In moderate climates ducks will not require any but natural shelter and the ducks themselves, beyond being a bit on the noisy side, are interesting and intelligent birds and give little worry in relation to their many advantages.

BREEDS OF DUCKS

Ducks are divided into three major categories: [1] meat ducks, [2] egg producers and [3] ornamental ducks. In this work we will not be concerned with the third class for they are used primarily in zoos, parks and country estates that are interested in their ornamental attributes. However class 1 and class 2 are of importance to those living in the country.

The meat ducks are made up of the following breeds: Pekin, Alesbury, Muscovy, Roen, Cayuga, Buff and Swedish. Of these breeds the Pekin and Muscovy are considered the most popular in the United States . . . the Pekin being the mainstay in the duckling, industry of Long Island and other Eastern States. The Muscovy is very popular in California, Oregon and Washington (as well as in the Eastern States) although many Pekins are also found on the Pacific Coast. Both breeds are very satisfactory for the average American locality and both produce excellent carcasses.

Breeds most suitable for egg production are the Runner (White, Buff and Penciled), Buff and Khaki-Campbell. Of these the Runner is by far the most popular and many duck fanciers who are fond of duck eggs maintain a few of this breed for the Runner is to the duck world what the White Leghorn is to the chicken world.

Choice of breed will therefore depend on whether the prospective duck raiser is interested in meat or eggs. Here on Toowoomba, where we usually maintain upwards from twenty ducks, we keep the Pekin and are supplied with all the ducks that we require for the table as well as having a number of surplus eggs that are consumed by the family.

The Muscovy is most popular in the Eastern States. This breed comes in two varieties . . . the White and dark. They are excellent fliers and require little care as they will forage wide. They are quite good egg producers and in contrast to the Pekin are good setters and will rear their young with little attention. They have proven very useful for the general farm and do not require swimming water for egg fertility.

STARTING WITH DUCKS

We have two general methods of getting started with ducks: [1] We may purchase day-old ducklings from a hatchery or [2] we may purchase breeding stock, mate our ducks, incubate and brood our own ducklings.

When we, started with our Pekins we purchased our original stock as day-old ducklings, raised them to maturity and saved the better females. We then traded some of our males for drakes belonging to our neighbors (who had also purchased Pekin ducklings, but from a different hatchery) and we continued from there. However, some breeders prefer to purchase mature ducks of breeding age and thus produce their own eggs. This may be practical if water is available for as has already been mentioned it is difficult to produce fertile eggs without sufficient water for the swimming of the breeding flock. If water is not available, then day-old ducklings is the only answer.

DAY-OLD DUCKLINGS

Once the question of desired breed has been settled, and contact has been made with a reputable hatchery for the purchase of the ducklings, we are ready to undertake the raising of our ducks. Numbers ordered will depend on space available, how much time we wish to devote to our birds and the number of ducks, eggs, or both that we are interested in producing. We started with 25 ducklings (ordered from a Wisconsin hatchery and flown air express) and we raised every one of the 24 that were alive upon arrival.

Ducklings may be successfully placed under chicken hens in brooding coops. However if hens are not available, ducklings are the easiest of all fowl to raise with an artificial brooder.

These brooders may be the same ones that we used for either chickens or turkeys. Ducks are maintained at a temperature of 90 to 95 degrees Fahrenheit for the first week, 80 to 85 the second and at about 75 the third, and from then until the ducklings are six weeks old, they should be kept at from 65 to 70 degrees. After that, ducklings require no heat unless the breeder is situated in a very severe climate where it might be prudent to allow the ducks a little heat during cold nights for their seventh and eighth week. Great care should be exercised in keeping the litter in the brooder room dry and watering devices should be arranged so that ducks cannot climb