

# Raising Geese



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*Cover photo courtesy of The American Bantam Association*

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# RAISING GEESE

Geese are very hardy, are the closest grazers known, and can live almost entirely on good pasture. They can be raised profitably only where they have access to good range. Mature geese seldom need a house except in winter or during stormy weather when some protection should be provided. The young need housing to protect them from wild and domestic animals and from the weather.

## BREEDS

In the United States, many of the popular breeds of geese originated from the wild gray goose and have been domesticated for many centuries. The nine breeds described here are considered the most popular in this country. Other breeds known to exist in the United States include Brecon Buff, Pomeranian and Roman.

### ● Toulouse

This is the largest standard breed of geese and the Mammoth Dewlap Toulouse often reach 20 to 26 pounds in weight (although other strains of Toulouse weigh less). The back is dark gray in color shading to light gray on the breast. The bill is pale yellow, and shanks and feet are a deep reddish-orange. This breed has been very popular for many years.

### ● Embden

The present breed name, Embden, is from the German city that exported many geese to England. The Embden is a large white goose slightly smaller, more sprightly, and much tighter-feathered than the Mammoth Dewlap variety of Toulouse. The Embden is a much better sitter than the Toulouse, and is probably the most popular market goose raised in the United States. It is a good breeder, has white pin-feathers, is a rapid grower, and matures early. Adults weigh from 16 to 26 pounds.

### ● African

The African is an ashy brown color having a lighter color on the breast, a black beak and dark orange legs and feet. It originated in India but is erroneously reported to have come from Africa. It has a distinctive black knob or protuberance on its head. The males are especially popular for crossing with other breeds. This breed is apt to be very noisy. Adults weigh from 14 to 20 pounds. As a market goose, it is not as popular as the Embden or Toulouse breeds because of its characteristically dark beak and pin feathers.

### ● American Buff

This newest addition to the American Standard is light buff in color, shading to almost white on the breast. This variety makes an excellent market goose and is gaining in popularity. Adults weigh from 15 to 18 pounds.

### ● Chinese

Brown and the White varieties of Chinese geese are available. They are smaller and more swanlike in appearance than other standard breeds. The Brown Chinese goose has a russet-brown plumage (lighter on the underside of the body), a brown head, a dark slate knob, and a black or dark slate bill. The White Chinese goose is pure white and has an orange bill and knob. Both varieties mature early and are excellent egg producers. It is possible to have both varieties successfully reproduce themselves the first season. Their small size (10 to 12 pounds) makes them well adapted to consumption in the home.

### ● Sebastopol

This breed is white and has twisted and curled feathers on the upper part of the body. It is kept primarily as an ornamental breed. Adults weigh 12 to 14 pounds.

● Pilgrim

A medium-size, sturdy, fast-growing breed raised primarily for meat and feathers. The breed is unique in that it is sex-linked in plumage color so that males and females may be distinguished at hatching and throughout life. Males are white with blue eyes; the females gray, shading to near white on the breast and having dark hazel colored eyes. Adults weigh 12 to 14 pounds.

● Canada

The Canada or wild goose which is the American Wild Goose can be kept in captivity only by close confinement. They are used in private or public parks and by hunters for decoys. They have grey to black plumage of varying shades with lighter breast feathers. The head is black with distinctive white markings. The ganders do not breed until they are 2 years old and seldom mate until the third season. They mate in pairs only. They are not economical for commercial raising because they do not reproduce as well as other breeds. Before Canada geese can be sold or transferred to another person, a permit must be obtained from the Fish and Wildlife Service of the U. S. Department of Interior.

● Egyptian

The Egyptian is a long-legged but small, brightly colored goose adapted for ornamental purposes and rarely kept in this country. It is a beautiful bird but has no commercial market potential except for sale to people desiring them because of their attractive appearance. Adults weigh from 4 to 6 pounds.

### REPRODUCTION

Geese, like other kinds of poultry, should be selected for size, prolificacy, and vigor. Medium-size birds of breeds make the best breeders. A gander may be mated with from one to five geese, although some males refuse to mate with some females. Pair or trio mat-

ing gives the best results if the ganders are kept in separate pens to prevent fighting. Mate geese at least 1 month prior to the breeding season. Do not change these matings from year to year except when they prove unsatisfactory. If matings are changed, keep previously mated birds as far apart as possible. Geese 2 to 5 years of age normally give best breeding results.

### SEXING

The sex of young geese is very difficult to determine. The adult gander often has different characteristics than the female. He is usually larger and coarser than the goose, and has a shrill, high voice; the female has a harsh, coarse cry. The gander has a longer neck and larger head, and in common geese, is lighter colored than the female.



Figure 1. Exposed reproductive organ of immature male, showing concentric rings.

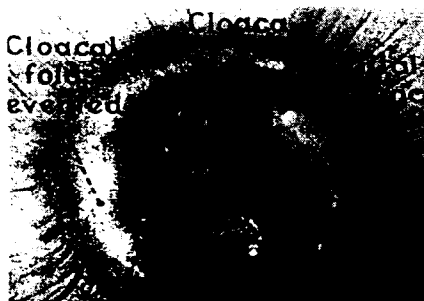


Figure 2. The adult female eminence.

Sex may also be determined by examining the sex organs. Catch the goose and place it on its back on either your knee or a table. Move the tail over the edge so that it can easily be bent downward. Insert your index finger into the cloaca about ½ inch and move it around in a circular motion to relax the sphincter muscle that closes the opening. Next apply some pressure below and on the sides of the vent to evert or expose the sex organs.

## EGG PRODUCTION AND CARE

In spring, the female will usually lay from 20 to 30 eggs. If artificial incubation and brooding is used it may be desirable to extend the laying season by providing 16 hours of light per day for breeders. Following natural incubation and brooding geese will return to egg production during the winter if 16 hours of artificial light are provided per day. In most climates, additional shelter must be provided for off-season natural brooding.

Eggs to be hatched should be gathered daily and kept in a cool, damp place, (55° to 70° F and 75 percent relative humidity). If hatching eggs are held for more than 7 days before incubation, turn them daily to increase the hatch. Hatchability decreases fairly rapidly after a 6- to 7-day holding period unless holding conditions are excellent. Eggs for table use should be refrigerated.

Eggs can either be dry-cleaned by buffing with sandpaper or washed. Washing should be done in 100° to 110° F water containing a detergent sanitizer. For best results, wash immediately after gathering and dry promptly before storage.

## INCUBATION

Incubation varies from 30 days for most geese to 35 days for Canadian and Egyptian geese. From 9 to 12 eggs can be set under a goose and 4 to 6 eggs under a chicken hen. Females should have ready access to feed and water. When chicken hens are used, the eggs should be sprayed twice weekly with warm water. For good hatchability, nest sites on sod or damp earth are best.

Lice or mites from the setting hen or goose can kill goslings soon after hatching. When

external parasites are observed, treat the adult female with an insecticide before the eggs hatch.

Artificial incubation can also be used to hatch goslings. Follow the incubator manufacturer's instructions for chicken eggs, but be sure to maintain high humidity at hatching time. For additional information, ask your farm advisor for Cooperative Extension publication OSA-252, *Incubating Eggs in Small Quantities*.

## BROODING

When natural incubation is used, broody chicken or goose females will brood goslings effectively. Goslings can also be brooded artificially under heat lamps or chick brooders. The temperature should be 90° F the first week, 80° F the second week, and 70° F the third week. Watch your birds—if they huddle and are noisy the temperature is too low; if they pant, the temperature is too high.

## FEEDING

Goslings should be given water and feed as soon as they are put in the brooder, or within 36 hours of hatching if set under hens. They can be started on mash or pellets containing about 20 percent crude protein. Commercial chicken or duck starter rations are excellent and can be fed slightly moistened with skim milk or water if desired. Wheat bread or corn bread moistened with milk is a reasonable substitute for a complete ration.

Geese can be raised successfully on drylots or in enclosed houses if complete, balanced diets are provided. However, geese are excellent foragers and for greater economy are usually allowed to pasture. They can be placed on young tender pasture as early as 4 or 5 days of age. If pasture is not available, fresh tender green feed such as chopped grass, lettuce, or cabbage is desirable. Geese on pasture or green feed grow well on a 15 percent crude protein diet from 3 weeks to maturity.

Several feeding methods are possible. Geese can be fed free-choice from day of hatching, but for greater economy feed should be restricted so that maximum use of green feed or pasture is made. The following is a prac-

tical restricted feeding program.

- |                   |                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0 to 3 weeks      | Feed all the 20 percent ration that goslings will clean up in 15 minutes 3 or 4 times per day, plus pasture or green feed. |
| 3 weeks to market | Feed all the 15 percent ration goslings will eat in 15 minutes twice daily, plus pasture or green feed.                    |

### Pelleting

Pelleted feeds are preferable for geese because there is less waste. The 3/32- or 3/16-inch pellets should be used for young goslings. Adult geese can consume larger pellets without problems.

### Water

Plenty of clean, fresh drinking water should always be available. Water containers should be deep enough so that geese can dip both bill and head but designed so that the birds can not get into the water.

### Grit

Provide sand or fine grit for goslings, medium grit for growing geese, and course grit or gravel for breeders. Geese raised on range or pasture normally get adequate grit from the soil.

### Calcium

When egg production begins, females should have oyster shell or other calcium sources available free-choice.

## GEESE AS WEEDERS

Goslings make excellent weeders and are used for this purpose in cotton, hops, onions, garlic, strawberries, and other hoe crops (not

cabbage or lettuce). For best results, start with 6-week-old goslings and provide shade and waterers throughout the field. Goslings should be kept hungry; a light feed of grain at night is enough, but the amount should be varied depending on the availability of weeds and grass.

## KILLING AND PICKING

Starve geese for 12 hours before killing them (do not remove their water). To kill, cut the throat at the base of the beak to sever the jugular vein.

Geese can be scalded from 1½ to 3 minutes in water varying between 145° F and 155° F. A small amount of detergent should be incorporated into the scalding water prior to the dipping of the goose. Immerse the entire goose while holding the head and feet. Geese can also be picked dry.

Goose feathers are valuable if properly cared for, and as much as 1 pound of feathers can be plucked from three geese. The feathers may be used in bedding and clothing. They may be washed in soft, lukewarm water to which detergent or a little borax and washing soda has been added, wrung to remove moisture, and then dried in the sun.

## MARKETING

The market for geese is limited. If you are considering sale to a commercial processor, you should arrange for marketing before you start raising geese.

Most geese are marketed or slaughtered for home use in fall or winter when they are 5 to 6 months old and relatively free of pin feathers. At this age many varieties will average 11 to 15 pounds in weight. Some geese are full-fed and killed at 10 to 12 pounds and 10 to 13 weeks of age as young, junior, or green geese.

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