

DUCK CARE SHEET

Social structure

Ducks are highly social and need to be kept in groups for company. They are inquisitive and vocal, very active and they love to forage. Pet ducks require human interaction and enrichment. Ducks may be kept in single sex or mixed groups. In mixed groups there should be a ratio of 4-6 females per male.

Duck Housing

Ducks are popular backyard pets and there are many choices for housing them. The ultimate decision on what type of housing you choose will be dictated by size of flock, space available, cost, disease control and predator proofing among other things. A secure and well-ventilated house or pen is required and should be predator proof. A 3-sided house is best to aid ventilation. Plenty of space should be provided: a minimum of 1.5-2m² per duck if they are housed during the day or a minimum of 0.5-1m² per duck for overnight accommodation. Shade should always be provided, alongside protection from wind and adverse weather conditions.

Ducks are messy and produce a lot of droppings, so housing should be easy to clean. The material on the ground is an important consideration. Concrete is acceptable as a base layer and allows easy cleaning, but it must be covered with substrate to prevent bumblefoot. Straw, wood shavings or rice hulls are all reasonable options but whatever is used should be dust free to avoid the risk of fungal respiratory infections.

Contact with wild birds should be minimised as they will eat the food and can carry diseases such as parasites and avian influenza. Predators such as dogs and foxes can be kept out with sturdy wire that extends 3 feet along the ground at the bottom. An overhang of wire at the top stops jumping over the wire. Rats and mice should be discouraged with vermin proof feeders.

Water

Ducks need access to water for preening and keeping their eyes, bills and feet in good condition. They also love to swim. Fresh water should be provided daily and be deep enough to submerge their whole head and cover their body if they choose. A shallow sided pool is best to allow easy access and exit or a ramp provided. A children's paddling pool can be ideal for this.

Feeding

Free-ranging ducks are herbivorous and eat leaves, flowers, roots and seeds of aquatic plants. In captivity, ducks may be fed a commercial pelleted food supplemented with fresh vegetables, fruit (avoid citrus) and worms. The diet of adults should be supplemented with calcium (eg oyster shell). Bread should be avoided as it does not contain the correct balance of nutrients.

- For ducklings up to 3 weeks old a duck starter crumb should be fed (protein content 18-20%).
- From 3-20 weeks a good quality grower feed for ducks can be fed (protein content 15%).
- Adults should be fed a commercial layer or breeder pellet suitable for ducks (14–16% protein, increased to 16–18% when laying). A chicken layer pellet is suitable for adult laying ducks, but chicken food should be avoided in juveniles.

How to tell the sex of your duck

Sexing by plumage colour is dependent on age, species and season. Most ducks may be sexed by their voices from about 6 weeks old. The females will quack loudly while the males make a soft, hoarse sound. Male ducks (drakes) acquire a curled tail feather called a drake feather when they mature.

Duck Diseases

Ducks, like other birds, have evolved to hide signs of illness for as long as possible. Birds who look ill will attract predators which is a danger to the flock and so healthy flock members will attack or ostracize an ill looking bird for the safety of the entire group. Spotting an ill looking bird can therefore be difficult in the early stages, so regular handling and monitoring to assess behaviour, body condition, food intake and weight is vital. The following can be signs of a problem:

- Ocular or nasal discharge
- Lethargy/unwillingness to move
- Weight loss or loss of body condition
- Enlarged abdomen
- Dull feathers or loss of feathers
- Isolation from flock/bullying
- Dirty vent
- Fluffed up feathers
- Lameness, lesions on the feet

Common diseases

- Bumblefoot – swelling to the bottom of the foot caused by pressure sore or bacterial infection
- Respiratory infections – various bacterial and viral infections
- Heavy metal toxicosis (especially lead) from environmental contamination
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Parasite burdens
- Fractures/ trauma from predators