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# Managing the Home Goose Breeder Flock

This NebGuide provides basic information on breed selection, sexing, housing and equipment needed, feeding, breeding, egg care and incubation for the home goose flock.

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*Earl W. Gleaves, Extension Poultry Specialist*

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The goose has been almost completely ignored in the rapid technical developments that have occurred in other parts of the poultry industry in the past 25 years. Experimental work with the domestic goose has been very limited. This means that management recommendations that are pertinent today may not be in the future.

Geese total less than 1 percent of the U.S. poultry population. They have the disadvantage of being low egg producers, which causes the cost of day-old goslings to be high. The lack of research attention causes slow genetic development and limited management knowledge. These problems, combined with the fact that consumer demand for goose is not high, have slowed the development of the industry.

However, even with these problems, geese are a popular species for home flocks in the Midwest. There are some good reasons why. Geese have the most rapid growth rate of any species of domestic bird. Breeder geese can be housed in uninsulated quarters with open runs even in the coldest climates. And, as breeder geese remain productive for a number of years, there is no need to replace flocks every year.

## **Breed Selection**

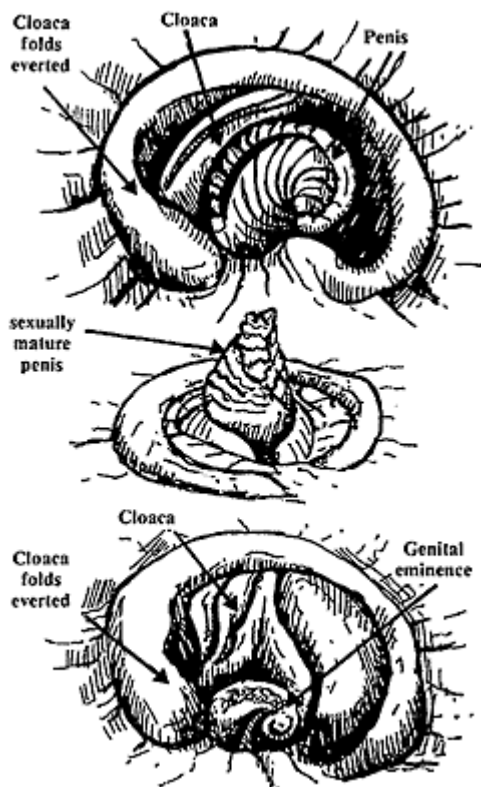
The choice of a breed or strain of geese depends on the purpose for which they are being raised. Many are raised as a hobby and/or for exhibition purposes. Breeds for this purpose are many and it is a matter of personal preference. Complete descriptions of many breeds can be found in the "American Standard of Perfection" of the American Poultry Association, Inc.

Human food production is probably the major reason for rearing geese. Economic characteristics are important in this situation. From the breeding and reproductive standpoint, it is clear that the more eggs a strain lays, the more economically goslings can be produced. Size of bird demanded by your market must also be considered. Other factors that may be important are 1) plumage color, which affects dressing ease (it is harder to remove pin feathers from dark feathered birds); and 2) feed conversion, which affects the amount of feed required to finish the offspring.

Among the best known breeds in our area are the Toulouse, Emden, African, Pilgrim and Chinese. The first three are considered heavy breeds, while the Pilgrim is a medium weight and the Chinese a light weight breed. One of the problems in discussing breeds of geese is that "strains" or families within the same breed can be quite different, particularly in growth and egg production ability. As you develop your flock, save the best for breeders. Select the best breeder geese each year from those that are vigorous, well-developed, have shown rapid growth and that have compact meaty bodies. These birds should come from mothers that were good egg producers.

## Sexing

One of the most frequent questions about geese is how can you tell the difference between males and females? This question is difficult to answer. The only sure way, and even this requires some practice, is by examining the reproductive organs. This process is quite accurate when the necessary skill has been obtained. Catch and lift the goose by the neck and legs. Lay it on its back on a table or over your bended knee, with the tail pointed away from you. Place the tail of the bird far enough over the edge so it can be readily bent downward. Then insert your index finger into the cloaca about 1/2 inch. Move your finger around in a circular manner several times to relax the sphincter muscle which closes the opening. Sometimes a little Vaseline on your finger helps accomplish this job. Next, apply some pressure directly below and on the sides of the vent to evert and expose the sex organs. The drawings illustrate what to look for.



**Top: Exposed reproductive organ of an immature male.**

**Center: Reproductive organ of a sexually mature male.**

**Bottom: Genital eminence of a maturing female.**

This procedure works in young goslings as well as mature birds. The general shape and location are identical, but maturity gives the organs a greater size and more prominence. The male penis is sometimes difficult to unsheathe. An inexperienced sexor might easily call a bird a female if, after a slight amount of pressure, the corkscrew-like male organ does not protrude. The only way to decide for sure that you have a female is to positively identify the presence of a female genital eminence. Otherwise, you probably have a male.

Mature geese can be sexed in a less accurate way if you are not too concerned about making a few errors. Observe the flock carefully for several days. Ganders are larger with a broader head, longer neck, more upright carriage, and they are more aggressive. The gander's call is deeper and stronger. Both sexes honk and hiss but the ganders are usually louder. Some authors say that you can place a strange dog in an enclosure with the geese. Ganders supposedly face the dog and the geese turn their backs to it. I have no firsthand knowledge of how well this works, but at least it is simple!

## **Housing and Equipment**

Breeder geese do not do well if constantly confined in a house. Restrict them in a yard with a house for shelter during winter storms. The house does not need to be elaborate. Protection from severe winter winds is the major need. The roof should not leak to help keep the litter (chopped straw, wood shavings, peat moss or ground corn cobs) dry. Allow about 10 square feet of floor space and 30 to 40 square feet of enclosed yard per goose.

Simple box-type open feed troughs, placed at floor level, are generally sufficient. Hanging-type feeders used for other poultry are also suitable. Place feeders indoors if at all possible.

Water is usually supplied in buckets, troughs, pens or automatic waterers outside the house. This helps keep the sleeping quarters dry. Providing water to geese in freezing weather can become a problem. If snow is available, they can be watered once a day. Without snow, they need fresh water at least twice a day. If automatic waterers are used, they must be heated to prevent freezing. Be sure the waterers are wide and deep enough for the bird to dip both bill and head. Wire guards over the waterers and placing waterers over screened platforms aid in keeping the litter dry.

Nests are not essential, but if used should be placed in the house. Nests can be made from barrels, large wooden boxes (2 feet square), or constructed specifically for the purpose. Allow one nest for three geese. It is a good idea to use straw, wood shavings or other absorbent material as nest litter. This prevents the eggs from becoming too soiled.

Lights operating 14 to 16 hours per day in the breeder house can be used to stimulate earlier egg production.

## **Feeding**

Very little information is available on the nutritional requirements of breeder geese. Feeds formulated for breeder geese are not normally available from commercial suppliers. A non-medicated chicken breeder type diet fed in pellet form gives satisfactory results. It has been established that 15% protein feeds are adequate and the levels of vitamins in a chicken breeder ration appear to be sufficient. Feed can be kept in front of the birds at all times during breeding season. Keep a supply of oystershell and grit available at all times.

Start feeding the pelleted chicken breeder ration at least a month before egg production is desired. A

breeder ration might contain the following ingredients: ground corn, 10%; ground wheat or milo, 20%; wheat bran, 10%; ground barley, 20%; pulverized oats, 21%; meat meal, 3%; soybean oil meal (47% protein), 5%; dried whey, 2%; dehydrated alfalfa meal, 6%; ground limestone, 1%; dicalcium phosphate, 1%; iodized salt, 1%. Each ton of feed should also contain riboflavin, 2 grams; niacin, 20 grams; vitamin D3, 600,000 ICU; and vitamin B12, 12 milligrams. Geese start laying in February or March and often lay until early summer. Birds on this feed do not need supplemental hay or grass.

If pasture is not available in the breeder pens, the birds can be put on pasture after they stop laying in the early summer. The breeder feed can then be restricted or stopped, depending on the quality of the pasture, until the next season. In choosing a pasture for geese, remember that *they will not eat alfalfa*. Clovers and grasses commonly used in pasture mixtures are readily eaten.

## **Breeding**

The larger breeds of geese usually mate best in pairs and trios. Ganders of some light breeds will mate satisfactorily with 4 or 5 females. It is normal for males to mate with the same females year after year if they have their choice.

Decide on matings sometime in advance of the breeding season. Since birds are usually put in their laying quarters in the late fall or early winter, it is a good idea to assign the matings at that time. This assumes that each mating group has a separate pen. If necessary, males that are used in separate pens can be replaced anytime during the breeding season. Normally, the new male will mate with the females in the pen. However, some authors have reported that occasional difficulties are encountered in replacing birds during the breeding season.

Geese lay more and larger eggs their second year of production than in their first year. The hatchability of eggs from yearling geese is also better. There are no definite data available on how long a goose should be kept. There is a general opinion that a goose will produce for a number of years (up to 10). Males apparently decline in reproductive performance at an earlier age than do females.

## **Egg Care**

Gather eggs twice each day, especially during cold weather. Always handle hatching eggs with care. They should be cleaned if necessary; dry cleaning is preferable to wet cleaning.

The best egg storage temperature is 45 to 55°F. Also pay attention to humidity--the relative humidity should be at least 70% in the storage room. If eggs are held more than a couple of days, turn them daily to increase the hatch percentage. Hatchability decreases after a 6- to 7-day holding period. However, when properly stored they can be held 10 to 14 days with fair results.

## **Incubation**

The incubation period for eggs of most common breeds of geese varies from 29 to 31 days. Four to six eggs can be incubated under a setting hen and 10 to 12 under a goose. Mark the eggs so that they can be turned by hand three or five times daily (never turn an even number of times because they will lie on the same side every night) if the setting hen does not turn them.

Goose eggs can also be hatched in either still-air or forced-draft incubators. There are two important differences between hatching chicken eggs and goose eggs. General procedures (see NebGuide G80-524, *Incubation of the Home Flock*) are the same and the manufacturer's recommendations should be

followed in both cases. The two exceptions are: 1) goose eggs must be turned a full 180° a minimum of three times per day. Five times is even better; and 2) goose eggs should be lightly sprinkled or dipped in lukewarm water for half a minute daily during the last half of the incubation period. This sprinkling or dipping seems to improve hatchability even when the eggs are under hens.

When the eggs are under hens, remove goslings from the nest as they hatch. Keep them in a warm place until the youngest are several hours old. If the goslings aren't removed, the hen may desert the nest early and leave with hatched goslings before the hatch is complete.

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