

Duck Care



Basics

Duck breeds vary broadly in size, shape, coloration, and lifespan. Smaller breeds, often used for egg production, weigh between two and six pounds and usually live between eight and 10 years. Larger breeds, such as those bred for meat, can weigh anywhere from seven to 18 pounds and usually have a shorter lifespan of only six to eight years.

Behavior

Ducks are highly social animals and need to live with other ducks in order to be happy and healthy. Ducklings imprint, or form a strong bond, with whatever or whomever is around them early in their lives. While having a duckling imprint on you is a wonderful experience, you won't be able to spend all of your time together, and a single duck will get depressed and lonely in your absence. Therefore, it is important to raise at least two or more ducklings together so they can co-imprint on each other (don't worry – they will still bond with you!).



Space

Your duck coop should provide about six to 10 square feet of indoor space per bird. If you plan to incorporate an attached outdoor run where your ducks will be confined, it should allow at least 10 square feet of additional space per bird. (You can also let your ducks free-range in your yard during the day; they will happily take care of slugs, snails, and other garden crawlies, plus help to fertilize your garden!) The interior of the coop can be quite simple – no roosts or nest boxes required. Waterproofing the floor and lower parts of the walls will make cleaning much easier (peel-and-stick vinyl tiles are a cheap and effective way to do this). Make sure to add plenty of substrate so your ducks don't slip and hurt themselves; we use wood shavings across the whole floor and add straw in the corners so our ducks can build nests. Ducks have few defenses against predators; they are slow on land, and most domestic breeds are too heavy-bodied to fly away. Therefore, your coop and run (or yard) must be safe and secure. Closures on doors and windows should be predator proof, and wire mesh should extend 12" down and 12" out from the bottom of the run to exclude burrowing predators. If your ducks are free-ranging, be sure to lock them in their secure coop before sunset to reduce the risk of attack by predators.



Ducks are waterfowl and use water in many different ways. They drink it, swim in it, use it to keep their bodies and feathers clean and free of external parasites, and they require it to facilitate the curious way they eat. Many duck breeds have rows of tooth-like bristles in their mouths that they use in much the same way that baleen whales use baleen: to scoop and filter food. Additionally, your ducks need to be able to submerge their whole bills in water to clear their nostrils of any debris. You don't need a pond (although your ducks would love it!) – a kiddie pool or stock tank will keep your ducks healthy and happy. If your duck pool is deep make sure that your ducks can get in and out of it safely by providing a ramp or stairs. A drain plug near the bottom will make large or heavy pools easier to drain and clean regularly.



Diet

Commercial waterfowl diets are readily available at your local feed store. Use a pelleted feed that is free of antibiotics or hormones (i.e. non-medicated); we recommend Mazuri waterfowl maintenance for adult birds (other formulas are available for young and growing birds). Offer pellets in water or have a separate dish of water close by to help prevent choking. Clean, fresh water should be

available at all times. You can supplement your ducks' diet with fresh produce, whole grains, or by providing access to pasture. Most treats are fine in moderation, but if you're unsure, do some research before you feed! Below is a list of some items to avoid.

DO NOT GIVE

- Anything moldy
- Citrus fruits (okay in moderation)
- Eggplant
- Green tomatoes
- Potatoes
- Raw legumes (e.g. kidney beans, lima beans, nuts)
- Spinach (okay in moderation)
- Pits, seeds
- Leaves, stems, vines

Health care and maintenance

Ducks rarely show obvious signs of illness, and by the time they do, it's often too late. Therefore, it's important to perform regular health checks on your flock so you can differentiate between what's normal and abnormal for your birds. Weighing your birds can also be helpful to track trends in weight gain or loss. When handling your birds, watch for signs of stress including open-mouth breathing or struggling to get free; if your duck appears stressed, release them and try again later. At Charlie's Acres we weigh and check our ducks once a month.

Here's what we look for:

Eyes	Discharge (may indicate respiratory infection), swelling (may indicate eye infection)
Ears	Debris
Nostrils	Debris, discharge (may indicate respiratory infection)
Mouth	Gurgly/raspy breathing (indicates respiratory infection), sores
Keel	Sores, thinness
Body	Feather quality, parasites, wounds
Abdomen	Fluid, thickening, tumors

Wings	Breaks, bruising
Vent	Discharge (may indicate vent gleet/yeast infection), prolapse, smell, sores
Legs	Heat, swelling, breaks
Feet	Heat, swelling, sores, wounds; trim nails if necessary

Common ailments

Avian health problems can be difficult to diagnose and treat, so it's important to find a duck-savvy veterinarian to help determine the best course of action. Below are a few things to watch for in your flock.

Ducks, especially larger "meat breeds" are at risk for weight-related issues including arthritis, and pressure sores on the keel and feet. A pond or pool deep enough for your ducks to float in will help relieve symptoms of arthritis. Pain and swelling can be managed with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs if your birds are used to being handled (if you have to chase them to administer meds, you may be doing more harm than good). Walking on hard, rough, or splintery surfaces can result in small wounds on the bottoms of your ducks' feet. (At Charlie's Acres, we check the feet of our heavier-bodied birds at least every other week). Keel sores are more difficult to see through thick feathers, so be sure to look for them during routine health checks. Sores can become infected and form pus-filled abscesses or large open wounds, and if left untreated can lead to more serious conditions in the bone and joints. A veterinarian should determine the best course of treatment, and make sure that any medications used are safe for waterfowl (some drugs that are safe for other birds, like chickens, can be toxic for ducks).

Ducks (and waterfowl in general) tend to have fewer issues with internal or external parasites than other birds, but it's wise to stay vigilant. Watch your ducks for changes in behavior, body condition, weight, and food/water intake; these can all be indicators of parasite infestations. During routine health checks, look for small orange, red, black, or white dots moving along your duck's feathers (mites or lice), or clusters of eggs at the base of feathers, particularly near the vent. Lice infestations can also be treated topically with medicated liquids or powders. Mite infestations are treated similarly, but can be much harder to eradicate, as mites are able to live for weeks without a host. Therefore, mite infestations require that your ducks' living area be treated as well. Discuss treatment with your vet, and make sure that any medications used are safe for waterfowl.