

# CARING FOR DUCKS

## INTRODUCTION

Ducks have been domesticated for thousands of years and are popular all over the world for their eggs, meat, and down feathers. In addition to their use in the farming industry, ducks have risen in popularity as pets due to their friendly nature toward people and their charming antics. Backyard ducks are outgoing and social birds that can make great additions to families dedicated to providing the special care required. The average duck lifespan is 8-12 years which should be considered before adding ducks to one's family.

With the notable exception of the Muscovy duck, most domestic duck breeds are descended from the mallard. Numerous breeds have been developed throughout the years and they vary greatly in appearance, personality, and egg-laying. Despite these differences, all ducks require the same basic needs to stay healthy:

- **Quality diet**
- **Clean environment (both land and aquatic)**
- **Protection from predators**

## What to Feed Your Duck

Ducks require both a good-quality pelleted food and natural grasses for foraging in their diet. Good nutrition is key to ensure a healthy and happy flock. Ducks should be fed a commercial pelleted diet appropriate for their age.

- **Ducklings** should be fed a grower or raiser diet until they are about 24 weeks old. This diet is higher in protein and contains an essential nutrient called niacin, which ducklings need in their diet in order to grow properly. Ducklings should not be fed medicated start feed meant for chickens as they can include products that are not approved for use in ducks.
- **Drakes** and non-laying ducks should be fed a maintenance diet, usually a game bird diet that does not have added protein or calcium.
- **Laying ducks** should be fed a game bird layer diet. These diets are high in calcium and protein to allow your ducks to produce good quality eggs while remaining healthy themselves.

Ducks are natural foragers, and vegetation/grasses should make up an equal portion of their diet as pellets. Allowing access to a grassy area can also help control insects and weeds. Make sure that the area is free of toxic plants before allowing your ducks access. You can contact your veterinarian or the ASPCA poison control for a list of toxic plants.

Corn and other foods high in carbohydrates, like bread or crackers, should not be fed to ducks since these can increase the risk of health issues, such as obesity, and are not a natural part of a duck's diet.

In addition to a pond, ducks should always have access to water in dishes. Water dishes should be refreshed daily along with the food dishes, as ducks can often be quite messy. Regular cleaning of food dishes also helps decrease rodent presence in your ducks' habitat and thus, prevents the spread of disease.

## Housing

### Birds of a Feather

Ducks of the same species often coexist well, but care should be taken not to put too many ducks in one area, as overcrowding increases the risk of aggression and injury. If you are planning on getting different species to intermix, make sure to consult your veterinarian or local waterfowl association since some species will not cohabitate peacefully. For example, larger waterfowl, like geese or swans, can sometimes be aggressive.

### Flooring

Hard surfaces like concrete should be avoided, since these can contribute to foot sores. Grass and dirt surfaces are the best for your ducks but do require more work to keep clean. Re-sodding or turning over the dirt is usually recommended at least 1-2 times a month depending on the size of the enclosure. Otherwise, parasites and bacteria can overgrow and cause issues in the environment.



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## Enclosure Furniture

Various types of houses exist for nesting to allow your ducks a sense of privacy as well as protection from the elements and predators. Hollowed-out logs, platforms, and areas of tall grasses for foraging can not only add a natural look to the enclosure, but can also serve as enrichment for your feathered friends.

## Water

Any domestic duck should still have access to a pool or pond for swimming – most recommend a depth of at least 2 feet. Small artificial ponds made of concrete can be built and are easy to drain and clean regularly. Large ponds are great for your feathered friends to enjoy themselves but should have either a water aerator or filtration system to prevent ammonia build-up. Reeds or water plants can be placed where water enters and exits to create a natural filtration system.

## Living Indoors

Though their outgoing and social personalities make them attractive household companions, ducks that are kept indoors are very prone to developing foot sores and nutritional deficiencies. It is not generally recommended that ducks be kept solely inside as they should have access to softer ground and water in which they may swim. Additionally, allowing ducks access to water helps keep feather quality optimal and stimulates normal preening and grooming behaviors. Secretions from the uropygial (preen) gland require exposure to ultraviolet light to convert precursors to functional forms of vitamin D.

## Predation

Ponds should ideally be enclosed with netting to protect your ducks from predators. This netting can also help limit wild bird access to your ducks, since they can spread disease. Nylon netting or wire fencing work well. If you choose not to enclose the habitat, please provide an enclosed pen or run and plant coverage to allow safe spaces for your ducks to hide from predators and to sleep at night.

## Taking Wing

Some states and countries have regulations prohibiting the free flight of domestic ducks. This means that your ducks must be confined to an enclosure with netting or wiring, have their wings trimmed, or be pinioned. Please contact your local veterinarian to learn which specific rules you must follow.

## Health and Disease

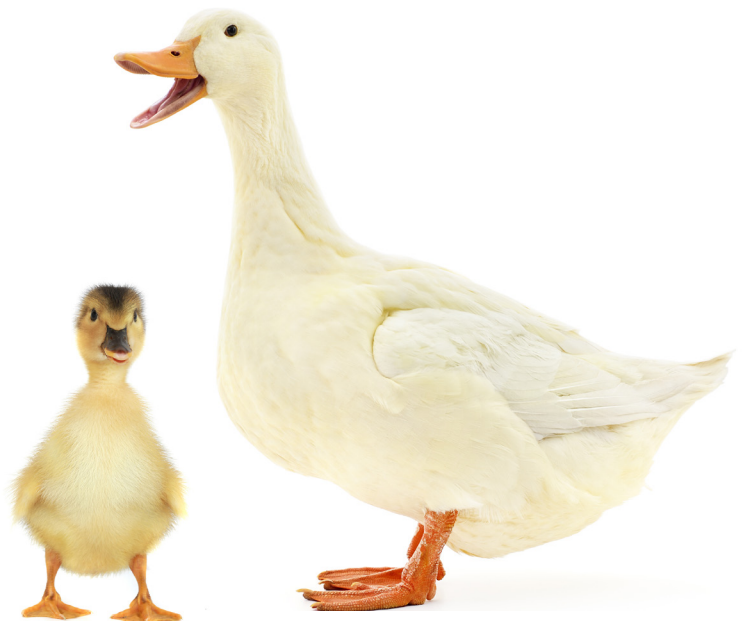
Ducks should be seen by a veterinarian soon after purchasing to make sure they are healthy and should receive yearly check-ups like dogs and cats. They can be prone to foot, respiratory, and intestinal issues, so always monitor for changes in movement, appetite, or behavior.

Please contact your veterinarian if you ever notice any of the following signs in one of your ducks:

- Limping
- Swollen or reddened feet
- Decreased appetite
- Lethargy
- Tail bobbing up and down when breathing, sneezing or nasal discharge
- Any other changes in appearance or behavior that concern you

## If You Suffer a Loss

If you are experiencing disease within your collection and suffer a loss, a necropsy (the animal equivalent of an autopsy) can be performed. The necropsy can often explain the cause of death and can help identify infectious organisms like bacteria and viruses that may affect the rest of your animals. If you are thinking of having a necropsy performed, contact your veterinarian and wrap the deceased bird in a plastic bag and place in a refrigerator, not a freezer. You can also contact your state veterinarian, as some states provide necropsies and testing at reduced costs.



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## Eggs

Though not as commonly consumed as chicken eggs, duck eggs are considered to be richer and higher in nutrients. Certain breeds of the domestic duck, like the Campbell duck, can be prolific egg layers. If you decide to raise ducks for eggs, you must supplement your ducks' diet with a laying feed that has a higher protein content (15-18%) and calcium content. Egg production will slow down in the winter, so you need to provide 13-14 hours of day length in the form of artificial lighting if you wish to have eggs year-round. Duck eggs do not taste or cook exactly like chicken eggs, so some recipe trial and error may occur in your kitchen!

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Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



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## For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird\*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds\*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Caring for Ducks
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds\*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?\*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry\*

\*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.

## Online Resources

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