

Pastured Ducks

Karma Glos

Pasture raised duck has been a very successful part of poultry farming on Kingbird farm for the last three years. We began integrating them into our system when customers began to request duck for special occasions. Initially my husband was concerned about the economic viability of the project since ducks are more difficult to process. However, we found processing to be the only difficulty in raising duck in our system.

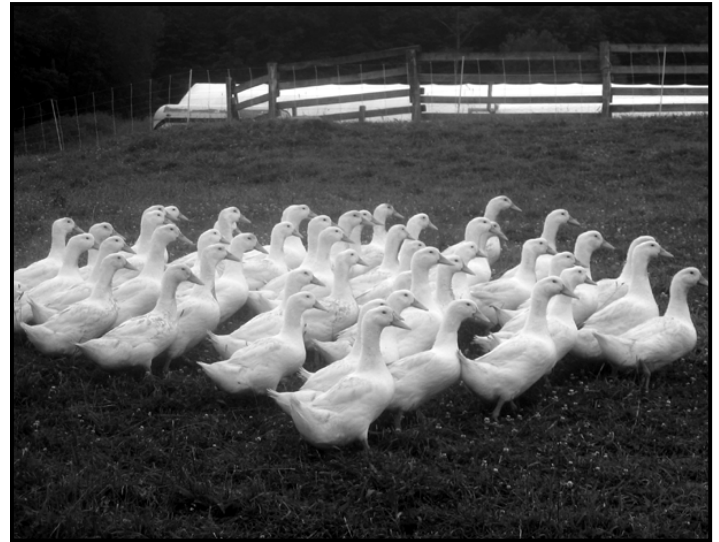
Brooding

We chose Pekin ducks to begin with for their uniform growth and white feathers. To start ducklings we converted an unused greenhouse into a brooder. This provided ample sunshine and warmth for spring brooding. When temperatures increased beyond the comfort of the ducklings we covered the greenhouse with a shade cloth and provided fans. We initially sectioned off the greenhouse to start the ducklings in one corner and then gradually gave them more space as they grew. Unlike chicks, they could not fly over the low barriers we used to divide the space. For brooding we used the basic equipment used for starting any poultry: infrared heat lamps, 1-gallon chick drinkers, dry softwood shavings, and paper egg flats as feeders. The only adjustment we made to this setup was to place the drinker in a garbage can lid or other low-sided lid to prevent the bedding from getting wet. Ducklings are much more aggressive with their water intake and tend to splash large amounts of water everywhere. They also enjoy running back and forth between the drinker and the feed, alternating mouthfuls, dirtying the water, and moistening the feed. All of this duckling activity can lead to moldy feed, smelly water, and soggy bedding if its not managed. We tend to change feed and water more often with ducklings, but not excessively.

Outdoor Access

As the ducklings begin to feather out and the weather turns warm, we begin to allow them outdoors during the day and herd them back in at night. Letting them out gives them access to forage (which they relish) but we can also feed and water them outdoors to avoid litter management issues. We do not allow them swimming water (kiddie pool) until they are fully feathered and even then it is important that they be observed to make certain they can easily get out.

We have managed ducks as both free-range on the pastures and confined within netted paddocks. Both methods have their pros and cons. Since we have very little predator pressure we initially released them out onto the pastures during the day and herded them home in the evening. This allowed them access to several acres of prime pasture and they sure used it. This method promptly ceased being workable when the entire flock discovered their as yet undiscovered passion for ripe tomatoes! This led us to the next method, which was and still is rotating paddocks fenced with electric netting. Ducks do fairly well with netting considering



they are so well insulated. The first few days they may go through it, but after a while they respect the nets and behave themselves. They will, however, go right through it or even pile over en masse if pressured by dogs or aggressive children. We have been quite happy with this system of rotated paddocks and find that the ducks graze well on fresh growth if moved fairly often. In addition to their forage they receive a full ration (Broiler/Grower Feed) which we feed twice a day with ample water and expect them to finish between meals. Limiting their feed in this way promotes grazing and reduces extra layers of fat later in growth.

Processing

The tricky part of duck raising is indeed the processing. They must be processed at exactly the right time or feathers and down will be in pin and impossible to remove. We typically process our ducks at 8 weeks and expect a 3.5-4.5 lb. carcass. On processing day we herd the ducks down to the processing shed and pen them up with hog panels. We also hang tarps around the hog panels to keep the ducks calm and be sure they have ample water while they wait. We follow the basic poultry processing routine with a kill cone, scalding, and barrel plucker. The only additional step is waxing and stripping for the down and pin feathers. This involves dipping the bird in melted duck wax, then dunking it in ice water, stripping off the hardened wax, and repeating the process. This extra step just about doubles our processing time; time which needs to be made up in the price of the bird. Since we find the ducks so easy to manage and we typically have zero mortality, the extra labor is only in processing. We package and sell the ducks as whole birds and currently charge \$4.50/lb. We are very pleased with the profit margin on duck although it is probably a limited market and we only offer about 150 each year.

Duck Raising Resources

Hoffman Hatchery
PO Box 129
Gratz, PA 17030



Reich Poultry Farms
1625 River Road
PO Box 100
Marietta, PA 17547

Johnson's Waterfowl
36882 160th Ave NE
Middle River, MN 56737

Stromberg's
PO Box 400
Pine River, MN 56474
(Duck Wax)

Kingbird Farm, 9398 West Creek Rd, Berkshire, NY 13736. (607) 657-2860

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