

Raise Pastured Geese and Ducks

Carrie Hardie

Don't be a chicken when it comes to raising all types of fowl on grass.



The author's Pilgrim geese prefer grass but enthusiastically eat most other pasture plants too.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Sheep, cattle, and other ruminants may come to mind first when your goal is to raise stock on grass, but we find pasturing waterfowl to be a rewarding and frugal endeavor. And when you see geese

mowing down pesky weeds with gusto, you'll wish you'd started them on pasture earlier!

We raise chickens, ducks, and geese on our small farm. As they can be messy creatures, raising them safely outdoors is ideal. While there are differences in our approach to pasturing chickens versus waterfowl, both types of poultry benefit from access to fresh greens found on chemical-free pastures. They aerate the soil, eat large quantities of bugs, and fertilize as they go.



Even ducklings (here, Muscovy) enjoy tucking to a meal of beetles, flies, and other insects.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Pasture Perfect

Geese are weed-eating machines, and mainly herbivorous. Capable of getting most of their daily nutrition from grass and forbs, geese can, theoretically at least, be raised almost exclusively on pasture in its nutritional prime. (We supplement our pasture with fermented high-protein feed.) Watching goslings tuck into grass is a pleasure — and we provide chopped-up grass and chick-sized grit to goslings as soon as two days after they've hatched. Goslings and geese will tear into chicory, dandelions, burdock, plantain, and many of the other common pasture plants. Need a section of fence cleared? Pasture your geese around it.

Ducks, on the other hand, are omnivorous, and while they'll enjoy bites of green now and again, they excel at clearing bugs from pastures and gardens. Because they relish young lettuce, peas, and other tender greens, I recommend using them to clear garden plots that have infestations of Japanese beetles, slugs, and other pests only after the plants have reached maturity and can bear some nibbling. Ducks delight in eating grubs and similar larvae, so cruciferous plantings with cutworm or cabbageworm infestations are prime targets for duck clearing efforts.

In addition, Muscovy ducks will consume frogs, voles, and mice. They'll work to eradicate a pasture's fly population, and seem to have this drive even as ducklings. They're experts in pursuing and catching insects. I haven't seen any waterfowl as doggedly dedicated to chasing and eating bugs as Muscovy.



Hardware cloth's small gaps prevent predators from grabbing an Indian Runner duckling for dinner.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Housing and Fencing

Generally, we use the same types of housing and fencing for waterfowl and chickens while on pasture: low tractors, hoop tractors, and portable netting. Tractors are mobile coops; low tractors are about 2 feet high, while hoop tractors can be tall enough for humans to walk into. We house our young birds in low tractors, and then move them into hoop tractors when they've grown and can be integrated into the main flock with access to pasture. While ducks and geese generally won't jump out of a low tractor, chickens can and will — and they can be quite a handful to corral.

Most ducks accept the restrictions of poultry netting. Geese, on the other hand, will fly into the net and become entangled. If the netting is electrified, the potential exists for trauma, injury, or even death for the trapped fowl. This type of entanglement happened once on our property; the goose survived the encounter, but now we only use netting without an energizer.



Juvenile ducklings and goslings are suited to low tractors, until they've grown enough to join the flock.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Another difference between pastured waterfowl and chickens is that waterfowl remain alert throughout the night. Juvenile chickens asleep inside a low tractor are susceptible to predators; raccoons, for example, can reach through 1-by-2-inch cage wire and pull out parts of the birds. Although ducks and geese are less easily preyed upon, I

recommend using hardware cloth fencing on the bottom 2 feet of any tractors housing poultry on pasture.



Hoop tractors, although taller than low tractors, are still easy to move around on pasture.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Predator Protection

On our property, we deal with threats from raptors (hawks and owls), canids (coyotes, foxes, and dogs), and small predators (opossums and raccoons). We choose to secure our pastured waterfowl at night in a predator-proof enclosure, such as a wire-wrapped tractor that can be locked with a carabiner to defeat animals with good manual dexterity. Our area is prone to high winds, so we stake down the tractors for the safety of our waterfowl. Two 8-inch stakes in the front

and back of the tractors have proven effective in even the worst gusts. Although staking adds a few minutes to tractor moves, it can make a life-or-death difference if your area is also prone to high winds.

Another option is to simply herd waterfowl from their pasture location to a coop in the evening, using long sticks if you need them.



Ganders can deter hawks and other aerial predators with a well-timed wing flap.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Geese are rumored to be good protectors of other types of poultry, such as chickens. We've found that running geese with ducks does

seem to deter aerial predators, and we've observed more than one juvenile hawk change its mind about swooping down on a duck when a nearby gander does a full-span wing flap. But I don't advocate using geese as guardian animals. While they may sound the alarm when predators are around, even adult geese are at risk of predation by canids. Geese are, at best, deterrents to small predators. If you expect them to defend against a fox, you're likely to find a pile of feathers — evidence that the fox won the battle. Without livestock guardian dogs to keep away coyotes, foxes, and dogs, we choose to protect our birds as fully as possible.

Best Breeds for Pasture

The best way to find the right waterfowl for your situation is to try different breeds. We've hatched and raised Chinese and Pilgrim geese, and several breeds of duck, including Indian Runner, Muscovy, and Pekin. Each has its advantages and drawbacks.



Photo by Carrie Hardie

Chinese geese are arguably the most efficient at clearing weeds, hence the moniker “weeder geese.” These swanlike creatures are the most affectionate geese we’ve raised. Their long necks can reach into tight areas, and they ate all the grasses in our pastures. Although they’re rumored to lay better than other breeds, we didn’t find that to be the case with our bloodline. We decided to try another breed when we observed our Chinese geese bullying other poultry on our property.

Pilgrim geese are the next breed we tried. Our research indicated that this autosexing breed is generally more docile and easier on other poultry species than Chinese geese. Our Pilgrims aren’t as aggressive as we found the Chinese geese to be, but they do occasionally pick on each other and the ducks; the ganders are most likely to be bullies. Our Pilgrims seem to prefer grass, but also

enthusiastically eat clover, chickweed, plantain, and most other pasture plants. In just a couple of weeks, four geese can trim a section of grass down as neatly as a mower.



Muscovy ducks and Pilgrim geese are two waterfowl breeds suited to pasturing.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Indian Runner ducks are a great choice for pasture operations. They're quick to respond to perceived threats, easy to herd, and don't fly. If you use a coop in conjunction with netting or fencing on pasture, these intelligent birds will quickly learn to return to the coop at dusk, often putting themselves to bed voluntarily. Pasturing them with docile geese has helped prevent aerial predation on our property.



Indian Runner ducks are easy to head and quick to respond to threats.

Photo by Carrie Hardie

Muscovy ducks are arguably one of the best pasture breeds. These tireless foragers enjoy hunting down mosquitoes and flies, and they'll also catch and eat small amphibians and rodents. Muscovies can fly well, so you should either use a tractor setup or be prepared to clip their wings to keep them within the confines of poultry netting.

Pekin ducks are large, calm, and easily sourced, making them a good choice for novices. Their docility can be a drawback unless your setup prevents both aerial and ground predators. Additionally, our Pekins seemed predisposed to developing bumblefoot, a foot infection. On the flip side, Pekins' fast growth makes them a standout choice as a meat breed.

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