

Raising Geese

by George A. Allen
Salt Lake City, Utah



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*Northern Spur-winged Goose
(Plectropterus gambensis gambensis)*

Photo courtesy of San Diego Zoo.

Geese are not difficult to keep and raise when you start with young birds. Some species nest readily while others do not, so the main trick is getting the birds young so you can raise them. The different Canadas, Barnacle, Snow, Blue, Egyptian, Andean, Abyssinian, Blue-winged, Swan geese, Orinoco, and White-fronted are among those that can usually be counted on to nest.

Emperor, Redbreasted, Brant, Ross's, Nene, Bar-headed, Kelp, Magellan, Spur-wing, Ashy-headed, Ruddy-headed are some species that are not as sure. Some pairs nest one year and then don't the next year, or the eggs may be fertile one year and not the next. In other words, you can't be consistently sure of success with these geese like you usually can with the first mentioned group of species. Of course, you get pairs of the first group

too that aren't good breeders just as you often find certain pairs of the second

mentioned group that turn out to be very prolific.

So we are thinking in general terms in categorizing these geese.

Most geese do not usually breed until they are 3 or 4 years old. Canadians have been known to breed the first year though, and many do the second. Ross's have also been known to lay as first year birds, but I don't know of anyone who ever got fertile Ross's eggs the first year. Cereopsis Geese often take several years to begin breeding, but once a pair starts, they can almost always be depended on to nest every year thereafter unless moved. I know of a pair that didn't breed until they were twelve years old, and then they raised one or two broods every year thereafter for many years. Hand reared or captive bred stock will almost always lay, but wild caught adult birds sometimes never produce in captivity. When getting

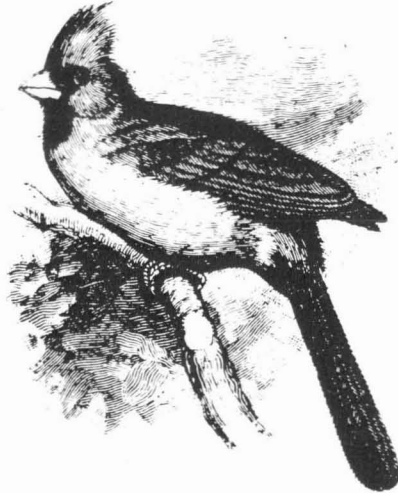
new blood out of the wild, it is best to get eggs, or at least very young birds.

If you keep several pair in a large enclosure of an acre or more, the larger the better, they will usually get along and nest satisfactorily, each pair setting up and guarding an area they want to nest in. If you find a pair belligerent, you have to remove them from the mixed collection and pen them by themselves. Species that should almost always be kept paired by themselves are the large species of Canadas, Cereopsis, Andean, Spur-wing, and Egyptian. You may find a peaceful pair among these, but they will almost always disrupt and prevent the successful nesting of other birds. Sometimes Abyssinian Blue-winged Geese will cause trouble too. So the ideal set-up for goose fanciers is to have separate pens for all your pairs. Have the dividers solid board or thickly planted so the pairs don't see each other through the fences. Or you can have a large area for a mixed collection of pairs that get along fine together and individual pens for the more aggressive pairs.

Pens should be well planted with grass, clover, dandelions, and other green vegetation they can forage on if possible. If not, you have to supply them with all the greens they want. Feed them a mixture of grains too, and by letting them partly satisfy their appetites this way, they won't graze so intensely on the natural growth in their pens and they won't be so readily depleted. If you can't keep natural growth for them, then greens must be provided, and lawn clippings are the best. The main diet of adults should be greens and grains. Corn, wheat, barley, oats are all good, and we usually use a combination of them all. A chicken laying feed can be fed breeding stock just before and during the laying season. At the Game Bird Center we don't usually use game bird or turkey feed for geese because they don't require high protein in their diet. We feed chicken feed because it is lower in protein.

Many species of geese don't seem to swim much and spend most of their time grazing around on land so an abundance of water is not necessary for them. However, a small pond a couple of feet deep is important for obtaining good fertility since most geese prefer to breed in water. In a mixed collection you can have a large pond where all the pairs can get in. But then construct another pond some place

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else as far away as possible, otherwise you may not get good fertility from those birds that are kept away or bothered. Where you have each pair in its own pen, you should construct a small pond in each pen big enough for them to get into for breeding purposes. Something about three feet square and a couple of feet deep is adequate. Some pairs are successful breeders on dry land, but for maximum success with all your birds, provide breeding water. In Hawaii when they first tried to raise Nene Geese for their restoration program, they were having poor results. When the famous aviculturist, Wesley M. Batterson, was called over to Hawaii to help them out and find out what was wrong, he discovered the Nene breeding pens did not have sufficient water for the Nenes to get into, and after this situation was corrected, their Nene production increased.

While we're on water, in areas where

the temperature drops to zero and below, open water is a must. The geese will get in this and keep from freezing. If the birds don't have access to open water during really cold freezing weather, then you must keep your geese inside a building during the cold months. If you live in an area that goes way below zero, then the building, barn, or whatever you are using to shelter them with must be heated. Of course drinking water must be available to them in pans all the time when kept inside. Straw for them to walk on helps keep their feet from freezing.

It is surprising how hardy some species are. We usually leave Canadas, Snow, Barnacle, White-fronted, Cape Barren (Cereopsis), and some others out on the snow covered lawns without even water during the cold winter weather, but our coldest temperature here in the Salt Lake area are usually never lower than 10 to 15 above, dropping to zero or a little below only

once or twice each winter. The only species we've noticed to suffer here is the Orinoco. It is interesting to see how such tropical species as Abyssinian Blue-winged, and Cereopsis can stand below freezing weather. The most delicate species are Orinoco, Nene, and probably Magpie, although we've never had any experience with this rare goose. Siberian Red-breasted are probably one of the hardiest of all, but due to their value, we've never wanted to test them too far. They have done very well outside in temperatures of 15 to 20 below with open water to get into. Just how much more they can withstand we don't know.

Geese do not always stick to their own kind and you can get cross matings and hybrids if you don't manage them right. In a mixed collection, if you see a bird leaving its own mate and hanging around another bird of a different species, you must catch the pair with the wandering

A pair of Nene Geese (Branta sandvicensis).



Photo by Lincoln Allen, at the Game Bird Preservation Center, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Photo by Lincoln Allen



Pacific Black Brant
(*Branta bernicla orientalis*).

Red Breasted Geese (*Branta ruficollis*)

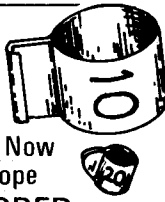


Photo courtesy of San Diego Zoo.

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bird and keep them in a pen by themselves, preferably in a place where other geese cannot be seen. "Out of sight - out of mind," usually works with geese.

Geese usually make good parents, and you can let them incubate and rear their own young. If you are going to leave them with the parents, they should be put in an area that is safe so nothing will disturb the family. If there isn't an abundance of grass, clover, and other greens for them to feed on, then lots of clippings or other greens they like to eat must be thrown to them daily. When cutting our lawns for this purpose, we use a rotary mower with a bag. This cuts the turf up much finer than the reel-type mower so the little goslings can eat it easier at first. If you have lots of lawn, you can turn geese loose on it, and the adults and young will graze and harvest it for themselves. Also a pan of chicken mash or crumbles should be put out for the young geese as well as a pan of finely cracked corn and wheat.

Never use game bird or turkey starter feed for goslings because it is too rich in protein. A high protein diet for goslings will cause them to become deformed in various ways; they will especially become crippled from slipped tendons. You often see geese that got too much protein when they were growing up, not enough to cripple or kill them, but enough to cause the end of one or both wings to turn outward. It looks funny to see the last several primaries sticking outward, and you can eliminate this by pinioning such deformed wings. Some breeders believe inbreeding causes this condition, and perhaps it can, but in most cases it is the result of a goose getting too much protein during the course of its development. So always use starter feed manufactured for chickens because it is not as rich as that produced for game birds and turkeys. Along with this be sure the goslings get all the greens they want to eat as well as some finely cracked grains. Be sure they have grit available. Also be sure they have good, clean drinking water at all times. A good water fountain is sufficient, for young geese don't need water to get into. They'll grow up just fine on dry land.

I once visited William Parsonson, a really great goose propagator, at his place in Paramount, California. At that time he was mass producing Orinoco and Andean Geese, and has probably raised more of these two species than all the goose breeders in the country combined. He was using only city water. He had a beautiful set-up. I don't remember the exact dimensions of his goose breeding pens, but he had a pair of geese in each pen. The pens must have been 10 or 12 feet

wide by 20 or 30 feet long, anyway long enough so the geese could get exercise by flying from one end to the other. In each pen he had a small concrete pond plenty large enough for them to get into for breeding. As I recall he changed this water with a hose by flushing out the old water and refilling with fresh water.

If you want to raise more than one brood from a pair of geese, take the eggs away from the parents just as the female seems to begin setting on them. If she stays on the nest for a whole day and has lots of down in the nest, then you can figure she's finished laying and incubation has commenced. Most geese lay from 5 to 7 eggs. Take the eggs and put them under a bantam or chicken hen that you know is a faithful setter and a good brooding hen. Many female geese will nest again, and you leave the second clutch of eggs with the goose to incubate and raise the young. When setting eggs under foster hens, you should carefully lift the hen of the eggs each day and turn the eggs because the hen may not be doing an adequate job herself since they are large eggs for her to roll around. You probably need two foster hens to cover one nest of large goose eggs, especially if they are Canadian or some other large species and if the clutch laid is large in number. Don't put too many eggs under one hen. Be sure a hen can easily cover the eggs. A good foster hen will take good care of goslings. Some breeders take the first clutch and put these eggs in a incubator. Don't do this unless you're really good at hatching wild waterfowl eggs. Waterfowl eggs are harder to hatch than other eggs, and it takes a real expert at wild waterfowl incubation to get good results. Domestic duck and goose eggs hatch pretty easy in an artificial machine, but wild species are something else entirely. The parents or foster hen will usually hatch every egg if they are fertile, but only a few breeders in the country are able to have good success hatching wild waterfowl eggs in an incubator.

At the Center we usually take all goose eggs from the natural parents and put them under bantam hens. When they hatch, we put the goslings in brooders. Six or eight young are put in a brooder four feet by eight feet with a heat lamp at one end where they can get warm when they want to or walk around in the cooler parts of the brooder too as they like. Geese, ducks, or any kind of game bird chick should be able to get away from heat when they feel too warm, this is why I don't like artificial brooders where the whole brooder is set at one temperature.

We use sand on the bottoms of our

brooders, and the chicks can eat some of this for their digestive needs. Be sure that if they can't pick grit up off the ground, it is made available to them. It is also a good idea to throw grit along the banks of your ponds for ducks, geese, and swans to eat.

We like the gallon size waterer in the brooders for geese since geese drink so much water even from the start. Along with all the greens they want, we put a pan of chicken starter in the brooders. Also baby chick size cracked corn, and wheat that you buy at the poultry store is provided.

At the Center we have spacious lawns, so after the goslings are a couple weeks old, we usually fence off an area on the lawn with two foot high movable fencing and let them roam around on it. Their water, chicken mash, and cracked grains are put on the lawn with them. When the time seems right and it is not storming, we leave the groups of goslings from the various brooders out at night too. This grazing is wonderful for them because they get good exercise walking around and pulling and snipping grass off with their bills. We move their fencing to new areas for fresh grass, and so the geese don't kill the grass in one spot. For 6-8 goslings we fence off 20 or 30 feet. When

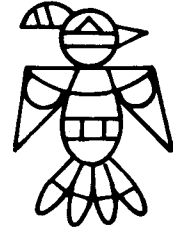
they seem to be able to stay out for good, we often take away fencing altogether and let them have the run of the entire two-acre lawn area of the Center where they finish growing up. If you don't have lawn to raise geese on, then you must put them in growing pens and provide them with all the greens they want. If you like geese and want to raise them but don't have much lawn, plant some now. Use plenty of clover in it and don't kill out the dandelions. Geese love all these different plants. Be careful not to feed them clippings that have spray on them. If you've sprayed your lawn, cut it, rake off the clippings, and then wait for the new growth to come up which will be free of spray and okay to use.

Most goslings are hardy and begin eating with no trouble. Not as many problems are encountered with getting them started as with some of the duck species. We've never had any problems getting geese started, but we, of course, have not raised every kind either. If you have strong unrelated breeders that were fed well before and during egg laying, and if incubation was correct, then you'll produce strong, vigorous goslings that you'll have no trouble getting to eat and grow into fine birds. As with ducks, unrelated stock that is not inbred is the key to real

success. Using the above basic fundamentals along with good judgment and ingenuity will insure anyone success raising geese.

(Editors Note: George Allen has prepared an article that goes into great detail regarding the mating and nesting behavior of the various geese. This excellent article will appear in the Watchbird's specialty issue on Waterfowl.)

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