

YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

The Backyard Duck Starter Pack

A companion to The Backyard Duck Keeping Bible · by Cal Brennan

Thanks for picking up the book. This companion is the part you carry out to the pen: tack it inside the feed-room door, clip it to the brooder, or fold it into your chore notebook. It's the brooder chart you check before the ducklings arrive, the feed-and-niacin guide that keeps their legs under them, the "ducks are not chickens" checklist for the house and the water, a breed picker so you buy right the first time, and a health-and-predator quick-reference for the mornings when something looks off. Real numbers, straight from the book, no filler.

Almost nothing that goes wrong with backyard ducks is bad luck. It's one of a handful of specific, avoidable mistakes, and the same three boring things fix most of them: clean water deep enough for a bill, the right feed with enough niacin, and a dry place to stand. Keep this out at the pen and check it before you blame the bird. - Cal

Duckling Brooding Quick-Chart

Brooding is where ducks are made or ruined. Get these first few weeks right and you move a sound-legged flock out to the house without losing one. The heat schedule below is the starting point, but the real skill is reading the birds, not the gauge: piled tight under the heat and cheeping means cold, scattered to the corners and panting means too hot, spread out and dozing means the temperature is right. Put the thermometer at the floor of the warm end, and always give the brooder a warm end and a cool end so the ducklings can choose.

Age	Brooder temp (at duckling level)	Key notes
Week 1	~90 degF (32 degC)	Start here. Shallow water only, dry non-slip footing from day one, niacin from the first bite
Week 2	~83-85 degF (28-29 degC)	Drop 5-7 degF. Step off starter to grower around now to head off angel wing
Week 3	~78 degF (26 degC)	Many keepers can start short, supervised trips onto grass on mild days
Week 4	~71-73 degF (22-23 degC)	Close to ambient. In mild weather heat often comes off around 2-3 weeks
Week 5-6+	Ambient / ~70 degF (21 degC)	Off heat once fully feathered and holding body heat without a lamp
6-8 weeks	Outdoors for good	Fully feathered = ready to move out and, finally, to swim unsupervised

The three brooder traps that sink a batch

- **Niacin.** The number one reason first-timers end up with crippled ducks. A growing duckling needs roughly 55 mg of niacin per kilogram of feed, about two to three times what a chick needs. Plain chick starter, medicated or not, is too low. Fix it from day one: an unmedicated waterfowl or all-flock starter, OR 1 to 1.5 tablespoons of brewer's yeast per cup of feed. Bowed, rubbery legs caught early usually straighten within a week or two on flat, non-slip footing.
- **Chilling in water.** A duckling's down is not waterproof, and the preen gland doesn't make real oil for a few weeks. A soaked duckling can't shed the water, chills, and can drown in a couple of inches. Shallow dip-access only, no swimming, until feathered.
- **Splayed leg.** On slick footing the legs slide out sideways and the hip can't set right. Give grip from day one: pine shavings (never cedar, the oils harm their airways), or rough terrycloth for the first day or two.

Feed Guide by Life Stage

A duck's protein needs are highest when it grows fastest and taper off as it matures. That's the whole logic. Overshoot the protein past the first couple of weeks and you invite angel wing; skimp on niacin at any age and the legs pay for it. There's rarely a "duck feed" aisle, so many keepers run one all-flock ration around 15-16 percent for the whole group and offer niacin, calcium, and grit on the side.

Stage	Age	Protein	Notes
Starter	First ~2 weeks	18-20%	Waterfowl or all-flock starter. Niacin covered. Off it by ~2 weeks
Grower	~Week 2-3 to maturity (18-20 wks)	15-16%	Back the protein down. This is where angel wing is prevented
Layer	From onset of lay (~18-22 wks)	16-17% + calcium	~3.5-4% calcium to shell eggs, vs under 1% in grower. Hens only

The niacin point never goes away

Ducks need roughly twice the niacin chickens do: about 55 mg/kg for ducklings, easing to around 40 mg/kg in adults, and laying hens need it most of all. If your feed isn't waterfowl-formulated, add brewer's yeast at 1 to 1.5 tablespoons per cup. Human-grade brewer's yeast runs about 5 mg of niacin per tablespoon (livestock grade is weaker, so lean high). Water route: plain niacin, not niacinamide or the flush-free kind, at about 500 mg per 8 gallons. Skip medicated chick starter entirely; ducks eat more than chicks their size and can overdose.

The two free-choice extras

- Oyster shell, laying hens only. Set out separately so hens top up as they lay. Drakes, non-layers, and ducklings must NOT get free-choice calcium; too much damages kidneys and drives gout.
- Grit, for any duck that forages. Ducks have no teeth and grind food in the gizzard. Penned birds or those on sand or clean bedding need a dish of poultry grit. Grit grinds; oyster shell dissolves. Two dishes, not one.

Treats, greens, and the 10 percent rule

Treats and forage stay under 10 percent of total intake; the other 90 percent is the balanced feed where the niacin and minerals live. Ducks love chopped lettuce and kale, cucumber, peas, chopped tomato, dried mealworms, and watermelon rind on a hot day, and they'll clear slugs, snails, worms, and grubs out of a garden better than any pesticide.

Never feed

- Bread and empty starches (crackers, chips, sugary junk): fills them up, starves them of real nutrition, drives angel wing, fouls the water.

- Moldy or spoiled feed, stale wet mash: aflatoxins and the botulism risk. If it smells off, it's trash, not feed.
- Avocado (skin and pit especially): persin, can kill even in small amounts.
- Also off the list: onions in quantity (anemia), raw dried beans, chocolate, caffeine, heavy salt, citrus, green potato skins, rhubarb leaves.
- Never layer feed for ducklings: the calcium damages growing kidneys and bones.

Ducks Are Not Chickens: House & Water Checklist

A duck house is not a chicken coop with the word "duck" on the door. Ducks live on the floor, they don't roost or climb to lay, and they breathe an astonishing amount of water into the air all night. Build for those three facts. A shed, doghouse, playhouse, or converted coop all work if you convert it on the duck's terms.

The house

- [] No roosts. Ducks sleep on the floor. Rip the bars out; they only collect droppings and rob space.
- [] Floor space: at least 4 sq ft per duck (5-6 for big breeds like Pekins or Rouens; up to 10 if they're confined for days in winter). Six ducks want a 24 sq ft floor minimum, roughly 4x6 ft, happier at 30-36.
- [] Ventilation up high, no draft down low. At least 1 sq ft of vent per duck, near the roofline where the warm wet air collects. Wet air, not cold, is what causes mold, ammonia, and frostbite.
- [] Dry bedding is 80 percent of duck health. Deep litter (start ~1 ft of pine shavings or chopped straw, keep adding and turning) in cold months, or sand for warm season and splash zones. Keep the water off the good bedding.
- [] Nest area low, or none at all. An open-fronted floor-level box, a half-barrel on its side, or just a deep-strawed dark back corner. Keep them penned till mid-morning and you collect nearly every egg clean and indoors, since ducks lay at night and pre-dawn.
- [] Ramp only if forced. Gentler than 45 degrees, cleated for grip, wide enough for two abreast. A ground-level walk-in door is better.
- [] Easy-clean sealed floor sloped toward the door. A dirt floor wicks moisture up and invites diggers.

The water (the part most people get wrong)

- [] Deep enough to submerge the whole bill and head: a container at least 4-6 inches deep. Ducks clear their nostrils and rinse their eyes by dunking; a nipple or shallow fount fails this test and leads to crusty eyes and nose.
- [] Elevate the water over a drainable surface (half-inch wire over a tray, gravel pit, or drain) so splash falls through instead of soaking the bedding.
- [] A kiddie pool beats a pond for a small flock, because you can dump it. Dump and refill daily in warm weather. A stagnant pond with no flow or filter is a disease liability, not an asset.
- [] Keep feed away from the water; feed in water fouls and stinks fastest and feeds botulism.
- [] Winter: a heated base or heated pet bowl to keep drinking water liquid, or swap frozen pans 2-3 times a day. Black rubber tubs let you boot the ice out in one piece. Pull the swimming water in hard cold; keep bill-deep drinking water liquid all day.

Breed Picker

Pick by purpose, not by looks. Decide what you want the ducks to do, then let the breed follow. Numbers below assume well-bred stock from a serious hatchery or breeder; the same breed name from sloppy breeding can lay half as much. Remember the noise rule: the loud quack comes from the hens; drakes only manage a soft raspy whisper. The Muscovy is the big exception, and a different species entirely.

Breed	Best for	Eggs/yr	Mature weight	Temperament	Broody?	Noise (hens)	Forager
Khaki Campbell	Eggs	280-340	4-4.5 lb	Active, shy	Rarely	Moderate-loud	Excellent
Welsh Harlequin	Eggs + light dual	240-330	4.5-5.5 lb	Calm, active	Yes, good mom	Moderate	Very good
Indian Runner	Eggs + pest control	250-300	3.5-4.5 lb	Nervous, flighty	Rarely	Loud	Excellent
Pekin	Meat (fast)	150-200	7-9 lb (jumbo 9-13)	Calm, docile	Rarely	Loud	Fair
Rouen	Meat (flavor, slow)	35-125	6-8 lb	Calm	Sometimes	Moderate	Fair
Muscovy	Pest control + lean meat	60-120	Drake 10-15 lb, hen 6-7 lb	Calm, hardy	Yes, excellent mom	Very quiet (hiss)	Best

Match the goal

- Eggs are everything: Khaki Campbell. The workhorse layer, an egg a day for 200+ days straight from good stock, cheap to feed. Rarely broody, so you'll incubate.
- Eggs plus a mother duck plus a little meat: Welsh Harlequin. Nearly as productive, goes broody, near auto-sexing by bill color at day-old. Watch the hatchery-vs-breeder gap most of all here.
- Eggs plus a garden pest crew: Indian Runner. Tireless wide-ranging foragers, the first pick for slug patrol. Too light for meat, high-strung.
- Meat on a schedule: Pekin. 7-9 lb fast, but pluck cleanly at 7-9 weeks before the week-10 pinfeather flush. Raise on a schedule, not kept around.
- Meat with flavor, and you're patient: Rouen. Deep dark meat, but 16+ weeks to weight. Poor layer.
- Quiet, pest-eating, lean meat, and you can manage a bird that flies: Muscovy. Doesn't quack (hens included), best forager, can perch and fly, and eggs take 35 days to hatch, not 28.

First flock and not sure? Start with Khaki Campbells or Welsh Harlequins. Hardy, productive, forgiving.

Health & Predator Quick-Reference

Ducks get sick less than chickens but hide it until they're already in trouble, so the real skill is noticing. Walk the pen twice a day and learn your birds' normal. Almost everything below is easier to prevent than fix, and the prevention is the same short list: clean water, right feed, dry footing, and pull dead or rotting matter out before it turns dangerous. You are a keeper, not a vet; when a bird needs medicine, get an avian or poultry vet rather than guessing doses.

Common ailments: signs and the fix

Problem	What you see	Prevent / first response
Niacin deficiency	Duckling reluctant to walk, sits on hocks, bowed rubbery legs	Waterfowl feed or brewer's yeast from day one; correct early and legs usually straighten in 1-2 weeks
Bumblefoot	Swollen foot/toe, limp, dark scab in the pad center	Clear sharp objects, soft dry footing; Epsom soak early; vet for a hot swollen foot
Wet feather	Bedraggled, soaked-through, spiky, shivering	Clean head-deep bathing water + good diet; bathing IS how they re-oil. Warm dry spot between baths
Botulism (limberneck)	Limp neck, can't lift head, paralysis climbing from the legs	EMERGENCY. Remove source (dump stagnant water, pull carcasses/maggots), warm, hydrate, vet fast
Worms / coccidiosis	Weight loss with appetite, loose or bloody droppings, poor growth (worst in ducklings)	Dry, rotated ground, clean water off the floor; vet fecal test before deworming
Egg binding / prolapse	Straining, repeated nest trips, hunched around the vent; exposed tissue	Proper calcium (oyster shell free-choice); warm humid spot ~80-85 degF; prolapse = always a vet
Wry neck	Head twisted or craned up, can't right itself	Fresh feed for vitamin E + selenium (brewer's yeast helps); supplement E; don't overdose selenium
Avian influenza	Sudden death of several birds, no wound, no slow decline	Keep birds off wild-waterfowl water, cover feed/water; REPORT to state vet, no home treatment

Predator-proofing checklist

You are more likely to lose ducks to a predator than to any disease. Ducks can't fly, climb, or fight, and they sleep on the ground. Build the fortress before you need it.

- [] Half-inch hardware cloth everywhere, never chicken wire. Chicken wire keeps chickens in and stops nothing; raccoons reach through it and weasels pass through a gap the size of a quarter (about an inch). Screw it down with washers, don't staple.
- [] Buried apron against diggers: either bury hardware cloth 12 inches down along the base, or run an L-footer flat out 18 inches and pin it. Tie it into the wall mesh so there's no seam.
- [] Latches a raccoon can't beat. They open hooks, bolts, and turn-latches. Add a carabiner, spring-clip, or padlock to every door and pop-hole; require two motions.
- [] Cover for hawks over the run if you free-range; aerial predators drop straight in by day.

- [] Lock them up every single night, and count heads. Ducks don't put themselves to bed like chickens. Herd them (get behind them, arms wide, walk slow, ~90 seconds once they learn it), close and clip both latches, glance at the mesh and ground line, and count before you drop the latch. Look again in the morning for fresh digs or tracks.
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That's the starter pack. Print it, take it out to the pen, and keep it where you do chores. When you're ready to go deeper on any of this, the full chapter-by-chapter is waiting in the book.

- Cal Brennan