MANAGING GEESE FOR REPRODUCTION

Geese are raised in small flocks in all parts of Georgia as a hobby, for pleasure, for exhibition and sometimes for profit. They are a popular bird for many small flock owners as they are very hardy and not susceptible to many of the common poultry diseases. They are excellent foragers and can be raised on good pastures or lawns as early as the first week.

Reproducing geese is not difficult, but requires some attention to management to get the most success from flocks. Geese generally start laying in February or March and will often lay until early summer, so now is a good time to begin thinking about ways to improve the reproductive success of your birds. Understanding the mating habits, nesting, nutrition and incubation requirements of geese can result in more young this spring and summer.

Mating Habits. Select geese for mating that are vigorous and well developed with compact meaty bodies. Medium sized birds are usually the best breeders. Young ganders make good breeders, but both sexes usually give best breeding results when they are 2 to 5 years old. Good fertility may be obtained in eggs from younger birds, but these eggs often do not hatch as well. Although young flocks are better egg producers, females will lay until they are 10 or more years of age, and ganders may be kept for more than 5 years.

Geese usually mate best in twos or threes in a ratio of one male to three or four females. Do not change matings from year to year (unless matings are unsatisfactory) as geese mate very slowly with new birds. If matings are changed, it is best to keep previously mated geese separated.

Nesting. Breeding geese prefer to be outdoors except in extremely cold weather or storms. Colony poultry houses, open sheds, or barns will work fine as breeder shelters if needed. Nest boxes at least 24 inches square can be provided to facilitate nesting. Simple nesting areas can be accommodated by use of boxes or barrels in the yard or coop area. Provide one nest for every three females. Straw or grass hay can be used for nesting material. Separate inside nests by partitions and place outside nests some distance apart to reduce fighting.

Nutrition. Although geese are excellent foragers, it is advisable to provide them with a
formulated breeder ration during egg production. If a special feed for geese is not available, a chicken breeder ration can be used effectively. These breeder rations are higher in calcium and will provide for stronger, better quality egg shells during lay. It is best to provide these rations in a pelleted form if available. Geese will generally do better on pellets and will waste much less than when fed a mash feed. If a breeder ration is not provided, oyster shell or some other source of calcium should be made available to supplement their diet.

**Incubation and Hatching.** Gather eggs twice a day and store them at 55 degrees until incubating. Hatchability decreases after about 7 days, so eggs should not be held more than 7-10 days for good results. Small inexpensive artificial incubators can be used to hatch goose eggs, but these generally require some experience for best results. When using an incubator, always follow the manufacturer’s instructions carefully.

Many goose breeders prefer to set eggs under chickens or ducks. Ducks are larger and better for hatching goose eggs. Incubate 4-6 eggs under a setting chicken, and 8-10 under a duck. If the setting hen does not turn the eggs, mark the eggs with a pen and turn them daily by hand. Turning the eggs will keep the developing embryo in the appropriate position for maximum hatch. Moisture is also needed by the developing embryo and should be added when chickens are used for setting. Moisture can be added during setting by sprinkling the eggs with luke-warm water daily. Eggs need no additional moisture if the setting goose or duck has access to water for bathing.

The incubation period for Canada and Egyptian geese is 35 days. All other goose eggs hatch in 29 to 31 days. Remove goslings from the nest as they hatch and keep them in a warm place (a small brooding area can be set up for this purpose) until all the eggs are hatched. If this is not done, the setting hen may leave the nest along with the hatched goslings before all the eggs are hatched. In warm weather, the goslings can be removed from the brooding area and go outdoors as early as two weeks of age as long as a shelter is provided. After about six weeks of age, housing is not generally needed.

Being prepared for the breeding season and understanding the basics of goose reproduction can result in many more goslings and more enjoyment from your flock. More information on raising geese can be obtained by contacting your County Extension office.

Dan L. Cunningham
Extension Coordinator-Poultry Science

County Extension Coordinator/Agent