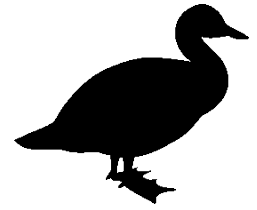


# Ducks, Geese, and Swans<sup>i</sup> (Anseriformes)

## Diet and Care Recommendations

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### General Information

Most species of waterfowl, including domestic ducks, geese, and swans, are within the 140 species of birds in the family Anatidae of the order Anseriformes. Within the family Anatidae there is a complex of debated subfamilies, tribes, and genera. There are many other domestic breeds of duck and most are descended from mallards. An exception is the Mucovy duck which is a perching duck species from South America. The Pekin or “Long Island” duck (*Anas platyrhynchos domestica*) is the most common breed of domestic duck. It is a descendant of mallards in China and has been selectively bred for meat and egg production. As such, it can be prone to reproductive-related disorders and obesity in captivity. Pekins are typically white-feathered with orange bill and feet. There are also many (60+) domestic breeds of geese such as the African, Chinese, Embden, Toulouse, and Sebastopol to name a few. Traditionally geese were kept as a source of meat and as a sort of “alarm system.” Geese which lack forehead knobs are typically descendants of graylag geese (*Anser anser*) while those with knobs are usually derived from the swan goose (*Anser cygnoides*). In some cases Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*) are partially domesticated though they are not legal for keeping as pets in the US. Swans have not been as highly domesticated and selectively-bred. Common species of domestic swans include mute and black swans. Their captive function has traditionally been one of aesthetics. There are approximately 31 species of Anseriformes that can be round in western Washington at various times of year. It is illegal to keep or care for wild ducks without appropriate state and federal permits and licenses. Injured wild ducks may be reported to a wildlife rehabilitator (see [www.birdandexotic.com](http://www.birdandexotic.com) or contact our clinic for assistance).

### Diet

For most adult ducks and geese we recommend feeding a commercial formulated diet such as Mazuri Waterfowl Maintenance. There are also formulations for breeding and growing stages. Your local feed store can order Mazuri products if they do not already have them in stock or you can visit [www.mazuri.com](http://www.mazuri.com) for information on suppliers. Vegetables and garden greens should also be offered and access to a yard, pasture, or pond is encouraged for other foraging opportunities. Ducks can be particularly fond of slugs, snails, worms, and insects in addition to grasses and waterplants. Scratch grains, cracked corn, pasta, and baked goods are not recommended since these tend to provide too much energy resulting in obesity. Exceptions can be made during very cold weather (e.g., sustained freezing temperatures) when energy needs are increased. Oystershell grit can be offered and is particularly recommended during periods of egg-laying.

### Husbandry

Lowland western Washington has a great climate for most waterfowl. However, ducks concentrated in earthen pens during months of rainy weather can quickly create a muddy, slippery mess. For this reason, well-drained pea gravel is recommended as a pen substrate. An artificial or natural pond should be provided with non-skid ramps to help birds easily climb in and out. Some protection from sun and weather should be provided. This can be in the form of a hut or coop but good ventilation must be maintained to prevent respiratory fungal infection. Protection, particularly at night, from stray dogs and raccoons is also important.

Because ducks generally produce very wet droppings hygiene can be a challenge. Leftover food should be removed daily from enclosures and small artificial ponds should be drained and washed out regularly. Algae blooms in bathing water may discourage use. Devices are available to circulate and aerate water to prevent this. Coops and ramps should be kept clean and dry. Pea gravel is best although straw can suffice if changed regularly. Artificial flooring such as linoleum or concrete is easier to clean but the hardness and slickness can lead to bumblefoot. If high-pressure hosing is used for cleaning we recommend wearing a mask to protect you from inhaling aerosolized pathogens.



## Avian Specialty Veterinary Services

Available for consults through your local veterinarian  
avian-vet.com • 360-271-7000 • vet@avian-vet.com

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## Medical Concerns

Annual examination of your flock or individual birds is recommended. A physical exam and discussion of history can uncover impending problems and allow us to prevent serious disease. Fecal analysis and bloodwork may also be recommended. Some common problems seen in domestic waterfowl include obesity, aspergillosis, bumblefoot, reproductive disorders, arthritis, and ingestion of foreign bodies. Obesity is most often a function of too much fat or starch in the diet, a lack of exercise, and genetics (e.g., Pekin ducks). Addressing the diet and increasing room to exercise can help. Aspergillosis is a fungal infection of the respiratory tract and may occur due to poor air quality, particularly in closed sleeping areas. Keeping quarters clean and dry is the best preventative. For birds under extra stress from transport or introduction, sometimes a prophylactic antifungal regimen is appropriate. Bumblefoot refers to a number of types of sores, swelling, and infection of the skin of the feet. Because waterfowl are mainly on the water in the wild, being forced to stand on dry, hard substrates can promote breakdown of skin and underlying tissues. Lack of dietary vitamin A, obesity, lack of exercise, and foot injury can also promote bumblefoot. Treatment can be difficult so it is best to have foot sores evaluated as soon as they are found. Reproductive disorders range from egg-binding to inflammation of the abdomen to cancer of the ovary or oviduct. Sometimes multiple types of disorders are involved. Symptoms include alterations in normal laying rhythm, changes in droppings, abdominal swelling or sudden weight gain, labored breathing, and straining to defecate or lay. Sometimes there can be clues on the eggs such as wrinkled or rough shell texture. Treatment should be aggressive and as early in the course of disease as possible. Often surgery is necessary. Arthritis is more common in obese ducks, particularly as they reach old age (roughly 8-10 years old in Pekins) but it can happen earlier. Slippery substrates and lack of ramps in pools can promote injury to the joints of the legs. Treatment options range from use of anti-inflammatory drugs to antibiotics (in the case of joint infections) to orthopedic surgery to fuse or correct joints. Commonly swallowed foreign bodies include nails, screws, and wire. Ducks are attracted to these items because hard minerals help grind food in the gizzard. Many of these items never cause a problem but occasionally a sharp item will perforate the stomach and lead to illness. Some metal objects can also contain lead which will cause life-threatening disease (weakness, lethargy, green diarrhea, anemia) and must be treated immediately.

## Zoonoses (Diseases potentially contagious to people)

- Psittacosis (*Chlamydophila psittici*)
- Mycobacteriosis (avian tuberculosis)
- Salmonellosis, campylobacteriosis (Obtained from droppings of waterfowl and can cause several types of illnesses in people, mainly dysentery)

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<sup>i</sup> This information is intended primarily for domestic breeds of ducks and geese and not intended for care of sea ducks, wildlife, or piscivorous (fish-eating) waterfowl.



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