

Information on Rearing and Caring for Sebastopol Geese

Our Sebastopols are not just bred for their stunning appearance (which gives the impression of them wearing a wedding dress), they are hardy geese with a very friendly persona. When you couple all these factors together it is hard to disagree that this breed is the best overall breed of goose for poultry lovers.

We are not waterfowl experts, so to speak, but we have provided some great advice for anyone thinking of purchasing Sebastopols or if someone is looking to improve their husbandry of waterfowl in general.

One of the first things to address when it comes to keeping waterfowl (as with any poultry) is how to look after the goslings:

Brooding Methods - For day olds, you should have their brooding area set up and warmed up in advance with a safe heat source. Make sure the area is large enough so the goslings can get out from underneath the heat source. We use both 200 - 250 watt heat lamp bulbs and standard 100 watt light bulbs in a reflector base depending on how many birds you are brooding and on how cold the temperatures are where you live. The main consideration is whether the birds are being brooded in a warm house or cold outbuilding. By providing enough space the babies will position themselves where they need to be, which is the by far the best way to keep goslings in a brooder. Do not over crowd the brooder and this can cause pecking. Young birds need supplemental heat until they are feathered out during cold weather.

Access to Water - Before they are feathered out do not allow ducklings or goslings to swim in water they cannot easily get out of it on their own. They can sink and drown if the water is too deep or if they get overly tired. Do not allow them to get chilled or get excessively wet before they are feathered out. They can get chilled even in wet grass. I recommend using shallow pans to let them splash around in. They don't have to swim and must have a heat source to dry off and warm up in at all times.

Fresh Water Is A Must - Fresh, clean water is your cheapest feed! It is highly recommended that you add poultry vitamin/electrolytes to the drinking water for about a couple days after you get your new birds. This greatly helps with the stress of shipping. Waterfowl babies are very messy and will soil their water by mixing food or dirt into their water. Defecating in their water is impossible to prevent so their water quickly becomes a stinky, bacteria laden mess so changing their drinking water a minimum of two times per day is recommended. It is fine to use a chick fount for waterfowl babies but make sure to also provide a crock or dish that is deep enough that they can submerge their entire heads into. This is needed to clean out their eyes and nostrils. They need to have this provided for them at least once a day. I do not leave the open water dish in the brooder area since it quickly gets pooped in and the water gets splashed all over and makes a big, soupy mess in the brooder.

Bedding - Do not use newspaper for litter since it is too slippery and can increase the odds of getting spraddle legs. I use old towels or thick paper towel for hatchlings. I also use waffle weave, soft shelf liner with new babies. It gives them very good footing. When they get a little older I switch over to pine shavings. Yes they will nibble on the pine shavings when first introduced to them but I have yet have one gosling or duckling die from over consumption. Straw can be used as well but it's not as absorbent as pine shavings. Clean the litter frequently.

Feed & Supplements - Starter & Grower Feeds - Waterfowl babies should be fed, free choice non-medicated 20 - 22% chick starter, if you cannot find a duck starter ages 0 - 3 weeks. They should be switched over to a 16 -18 % grower formula around 2-3 weeks old. Some people use game bird starter but this is usually too high in protein. Try to find a feed in the 16-18% protein range. Over feeding and lack of grass and exercise can lead to Angel Wing. If your feed dealer doesn't carry waterfowl/duck starter or grower ask them if they can special order it for you. Many will be happy to do this for their customers. Purina and Muzuri are two brands that have waterfowl starter, grower and breeder formulas. See what is available in your area.

Mixing your own feed in small batches - For those of us who don't have grinders or the ability to store large amounts of feed here's a breeding season recipe developed by nutrition expert Jeff Mattocks at Fertrell.

Recipe for 16% layer feed.

3.5 lbs fishmeal

1.5 lbs of Poultry Nutri Balancer

.5 lbs of Kelp meal

5 lbs of Aragonite

1 lbs of either Molasses or vegetable oil

(he said its best to use vegetable oil with waterfowl)

Add above to 50 lbs of scratch grains or small grain blend.

Example: scratch grains or better yet a combo of 50% wheat/25% oats/25% barley.

You only need to add fishmeal during pre-lay and lay periods.

Provide grit free choice.

Notes on mixing your own:

I'm trying to avoid soy because it has a precursor to oestrogen and most if not all of it (as well as corn) is genetically altered. Studies have show that GMO products have caused deformities and infertility in mice. GMO corn and soy is in most commercial feeds.

I just started using the Fertrell products fall 2010. Presently I feed the kelp free choice as I have done in the past with all my livestock. Aragonite is coral calcium and suppose to be superior to oyster shell.

Poultry Nutri Balancer is suppose to be a really good product and contains probiotics.

Nutri balancer and kelp meal is suppose to help combat mycotoxins in commerical grains.

Cracked Corn or Scratch Grains – and maintenance and breeding season feed requirements - Corn can be fed very sparingly to adults but should not be fed to young ducklings or goslings. A lot of people feed cracked or shell corn as a main diet because it is cheap. This is not recommended. Corn is a high energy carb, low protein feed which can make waterfowl too fat. This would be like you eating pancakes 3 times a day, everyday. A diet high in corn or scratch grains isn't a balanced, complete feed. Even free range birds that have access to greens and bugs need more than a diet of mainly cracked corn or scratch grains to be in good condition especially prior to the breeding season. Some geese will over eat and get fat if offered free choice feed. If you're going to breed them this could cause problems since geese gain weight internally around their reproductive organs. For a maintenance or holding diet they should get 1/4 lb of 12% feed for every 10 lbs of body weight and all the grass, greens or leafy hay they will eat. Or 2% - 2.5% of their body weight is a good rule of thumb. Breeding stock can have free choice 18 - 20% ration starting 3 - 4 weeks prior to and during the breeding/egg laying season. In fast growing goslings and ducklings too much protein or refined carbs can cause angel wing and leg problems in waterfowl so it is important to feed a balanced waterfowl feed if possible. Limited cracked or whole corn or scratch grains (a blend of wheat or barley, oats & corn) can be offered during the winter months and is beneficial to help produce energy to help keep birds warm if you live in a cold climate but it should never be their main feed. Rather offer a handful each before putting them in

for the night during cold winter months. If you live in the south they probably don't need any corn at all. Black Oil Sunflower Seeds are a nice alternative to corn for supplemental winter feed or conditioning birds for exhibition. Since sunflower seeds are high in fat feed in limited amounts.

Soy Based Feeds - Since the Mad Cow Disease scare most commercial prepared feed rations are soy based. In addition soy is typically extruded and any extruded feed product (crumbles or pellets) are in an altered state and not a healthy and natural form of food to be eaten by humans or animals. Also soy contains a precursor to oestrogen which has been reported to cause infertility or unbalanced hormone problems.

Sunflower Seeds - Are a good winter waterfowl snack food supplement. Whole seeds can be fed to youngsters when they are big enough to eat them. Throw a handful into their feed and see if you can get them to eat them.

Grass & Greens - Are vital to proper growth and development especially if feeding chick starter. Geese love & thrive on grass. Give your babies (from day 1) chopped greens to nibble on such as non-chemically treated young, tender grass, lettuce, spinach, dandelion greens, clover etc. if they do not have access to pasture. Provide fresh greens daily or as much as possible. This also helps to prevent boredom and pecking each other.

Fruits & Vegetables - Of any kind are loved by most waterfowl, such as...dandelion greens, lettuce, spinach, swiss chard, kale etc. Melons (including rind), apples, berries, fresh corn on the cob (even left over cobs from dinner to chew on) tomatoes, etc. Experiment...see what you can get yours to eat. The more fresh produce they consume, the healthier they will be.

Goslings tend to be more vegetarian and thrive on tender green grass, but green grass is vital for ducks as well.

Kelp Meal - Is an excellent waterfowl mineral supplement and can be fed free choice to any of your domestic livestock. Another excellent product is Fertrell Nutri- Balancer which is a chelated vitamin/mineral and probiotic supplement. This product is mixed into feed at a rate of 60 lbs. per ton of feed when making your own feed. Do not add to commercial feed rations.

Oyster Shell & Grit - Make sure to provide laying hens with free choice oyster shell. All birds need grit to help grind up their food. Use chick size grit for hatchlings. A superior product to oyster shell is Aragonite.

Parasites - There is too much information regarding parasites to include here and I am no expert but if you refer to <http://shilala.homestead.com> this site has some excellent information for you about parasites in general and worming your birds.

Ponds & Lakes - If they have access to a pond ducks will eat small fish and frogs, but remember when allowed on ponds or lakes, small ducklings or goslings are easy prey/snacks for large turtles/terrapins and fish like pike and bass.

Predators & Precautions - Do not allow small children to handle baby birds excessively or unsupervised. Protect from pets and predators especially when they are outside. Even friendly pet dogs can playfully maul small ducklings or goslings. When older, if allowed to free range...

make sure to enclose in a predator proof shelter every night! While there are wild predators and stray dogs out and about during the day the risk is far greater at night.

Training birds to come in at night - Ideally teach your goslings how to be herded with a bamboo rod or long stick when they are still small so you can gain control over them. If your birds have access to a pond you can train them to

come to a safe enclosed pen or coop at night by providing their daily feed there only at night. If you do this routinely it will become second nature to them. I have a customer who trained her birds to come in at night because she kept losing birds to predators, despite having a pond for them to escape to. Even her older birds who were use to staying out all night learned to come in. With time and training (and it didn't take that long) they all learned come in for the night. Why invest in quality birds if you aren't willing to protect them?

Wing Clipping - Clip your waterfowl's wings so you will have more control over them.

You only have to clip your bird's wings once a year after they molt and their new feathers come in. To learn how to clip wings including how to do the "beauty clip"

visit this website: www.poultryconnection.com/quackers/clip.htmlb .

Overcrowding - Plain and simple, it's animal cruelty! More often than not, I see people who don't know when to quit buying or breeding and have way too many birds which are typically kept in filthy, manure covered pens or stuffed into small cages, usually in some dark barn or shed. These people don't appear to have the time or the money to care for so many birds

and the birds usually end up dying off from parasite overload, various diseases and starvation/dehydration. Please resist the temptation to keep more birds, or any animal for that matter, that you cannot properly care for.

Some Common Misconceptions about Waterfowl

Geese are monogamous and must they be kept in pairs only – Domestic geese are not monogamous. Yes, some become very bonded to each other and will not breed or want to be with other geese but in general geese can be absolutely be with more than one mate. I typically have trios set up for breeding. Yearling ganders shouldn't be with more than 2 females. They are still growing so you don't want to burn them out before they have time to mature. Mature ganders can handle up to 3 - 4 females if they are fed properly, and healthy and if they are vigorous breeders but they tend to have favourites so keep an eye on the activity in the breeding pen. Some males and females will breed geese they aren't bonded to. Put certain unfamiliar geese together and they will breed within minutes during the breeding season (I have eye witnessed this) but typically they won't and need time to get use to each other. Geese are very sensitive so try to pair them up at least a few months before the breeding season which typically starts in late winter. It's best if they have adequate time get use to each other, their surroundings and your chore routine.

Geese are mean -

I didn't get geese for many years because of this concern but I've come to learn that not all geese are mean. In my research before getting my first geese I learned that Africans and Chinese geese are known to be loud and aggressive and that Pilgrims, American Buffs and Sebastopols tend to be more gentle and laid back and apparently in many cases this is true. While you will find good and bad in any breed my Sebastopols have been very sweet and gentle when hand raise by people vs. goose-parent raised. They are highly intelligent, inquisitive, love people and make wonderful pets. It can be a whole different story if goslings are raised by their parents and not bonded to humans. They can be flighty and very fearful of humans. I have found some lines of Sebastopols to be more flighty or aloof even when raised by humans so selectiveness is important. It should be noted that all ganders no matter the breed can be aggressive to one degree or another during the breeding season, which can range from harmless hissing and mock charging to outright attacks and highly aggressive biters and wing floggers. You should never turn your back on any gander during the beeding season no matter how docile they are during the off season. Not that they will do you great injury but they can and will bit you in the ass, legs or whatever. It's natural for them to be aggressive in order to protect their female and offspring (such courageous chivalry) and deserve the respect you would give any breeding male. Children should never be allowed to be around breeding age ganders unsupervised by adults. If you don't plan on breeding geese a few females might be more ideal since gander aggression can last up to 4 months so that can add up to one, long headache.

Weeder Geese -

It's debatable that you can use geese as "weeders" since they will not only eat the weeds in your strawberries patch but they will eat the strawberries too. In my experience, geese seem to highly prefer grass over weeds. In fact my geese eat very few weeds but if weeds are the only greens available they will eat them. I have read of running geese in orchards with established tree's or large crops like mature tobacco or corn and in these situations their usefulness as weeder probably works. So geese can apparently be used in some situations like the fore mentioned but most likely not in your home strawberry or veggie patch. Beware geese will girdle trees especially if confined with no grass to graze on.

Geese are infertile as yearling's -

While some breeds or individuals may be slower developing I haven't had any problems with infertile yearling's. If you have a yearling gander with low fertility or one that doesn't breed just be patient and give him another year to mature.

Geese cannot be kept in barns or coops especially ones with low ceilings -

A long time waterfowl breeder told me this but I have not found this to be a problem. While I certainly don't think its a good idea to keep any creature confined all the time, because its not healthy for them emotionally or physically, to protect my birds from predators they are closed into a shed every night. They are turned out every morning. Given the opportunity, if I left the shed door open, both my geese and ducks would spend a lot of time loafing inside so I really don't feel its harmful to them or causes them any stress. If I'm a little late putting them in at night and it's almost dark most the birds will congregate around the barn door waiting to be let in and when I let them in they march right into their personal stalls. Both my geese and ducks successfully set on their eggs in the shed. This not only protects them and their eggs from predators but it gives them some privacy and seclusion from the main flock and would-be pests which I feel is especially helpful with young, inexperienced hens. Also some Muscovy drakes will try to breed nesting ducks and disrupt the nest or break eggs so the setting Muscovy girls appreciate some protection from the randy drakes.

Wintering waterfowl or poultry in cold climates -

Over the years I have found that people tend to be overly concerned about keeping livestock outside in cold winter climates and impose human needs on their animals. First and foremost, livestock are able to live out in the elements. Geese have a very warm down jacket that keeps them warm. Some very basic requirements will keep your waterfowl warm, happy and healthy even during the coldest months of winter. All that is needed for waterfowl is shelter from the wind, protection from the bare ground, and plenty of feed and fresh water DAILY. Shelters need not be air tight. In fact good air circulation is very important to your birds health. Shelters can range from stacked up bales of straw, to lean-to's, to coops and barns. Since Sebastopol's feathers are more open and airy than smooth, tight feathered breeds some precautions are needed to insure they don't get soaked to the skin from too much exposure to wet snow or rain and high wind days. If they get too wet they should be provided with shelter to dry out in. They do not need heat lamps, just shelter from the wind and thick, dry bedding. I use pine shavings for inside use but if your ducks or geese are kept outside during the winter months a thick bed of wood chips or pea gravel (optional for drainage) topped off with a thick bed of straw will give them some good insulation from the frozen ground. You don't want to hear the horror stories I've heard about people finding their duck's or geese's feet frozen to the ground in the morning! During severe cold weather I keep my geese in their box stalls because if turned out all they do is hunker down and not move around so it seems pointless for them to be out during really bad days expending energy on trying to stay warm. When kept inside during severe weather they are more content acting, moving about, talking and preening. I provide them with leafy hay and apples or carrots to give them something interesting to nibble on and to prevent boredom. Make sure your facilities are large enough to avoid over crowding. When building geese shelters, size wise, think of them as little goats vs. birds. Provide them with plenty of room. They need to be able to move about. Geese do not like being over crowded or kept in window-less dark sheds. Please do not enclose them in ventless, plastic or metal storage sheds! Geese appreciate their pools being

filled even during the coldest months of winter. I try to fill their pools a few times a week so they can bathe and keep clean.

Sebastopols are hard to breed -

I have not found this to be the case. I've only had Sebastopols since 2005 but my first breeding season and every consecutive one after that has been a success. I've never had to clip their feathers around their vent area to make for easier access. I have heard that Sebastopol geese are clannish and don't like being around other breeds of geese and ducks. While I don't know how true this is I personally feel its best to keep different species (e.g. chickens, geese/ducks) separate from each other due to their different feed and housing needs and especially when they are setting on eggs. Plus geese can bully ducks and chickens around. Some common reasons for failure to produce live offspring could be: lack of proper nutrition, parasite overload, overcrowding or too much stress in the environment, frozen eggs or improper handling or incubating of eggs. Artificially incubating waterfowl eggs is harder than hatching out chicken eggs. With waterfowl expect a 30 - 50% failure rate.

Setting Geese -

I talked with a new goose owner whose goose died because she failed to get off the nest to eat or drink. This person did not know that if a setting goose doesn't get off the nest enough you need to physically remove her so she can have a potty break, eat and drink. I place my tight setters outside while I'm doing chores. They will protest and try to return to the nest before eating and drinking so block them from returning to the nest too soon. Setting hens hold their poop in while on the nest and need to get off from time to time to relieve themselves. Just make sure to hold them bum facing away from you when moving them or a huge, stinky poop bomb will explode on you! After their initial protest they will enjoy something to eat and drink and a quick bath in some fresh water.

Geese aren't happy unless they have a lot of grass to graze on -

Ideally no animal should be constantly confined to a small pen or even a large pen if it's dirt covered without something to occupy their time. Geese thrive on grass, love to graze and it's vital for their good health, never-the-less some people simply don't have acres of grass for grazing or must keep their birds penned up, but allow them to eat grass as much as possible.

If you don't have any or enough grass buy some green, leafy hay for them to nibble on or supplement their diet with 100% alfalfa cubes or pellets. Do not use rabbits pellets since they are too high in salt.

Waterfowl aren't happy unless they have a pond to swim in -

Ideally it would be wonderful to have a pond for your waterfowl but they do perfectly fine with kiddie wading pools or any safe large container filled with fresh water daily. B&Q carry black, plastic, rectangular shaped containers to mix concrete in which are more sturdy than kiddie wading pools and make nice vessels for waterfowl bathing water. It's very important to give waterfowl fresh bathing water daily, especially during the breeding season since they like to breed in water. Geese actually prefer fresh water to muddy, dirty water so replacing water daily is a good routine to get into. Even during the frigid winter months I try to fill their bathing pools at least 2 - 3 times a week and daily when the weather is nice.

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