



## Hatching and keeping ducklings

I've had so many enquiries about the intricacies of hatching and rearing ducklings that I've put together some information that has certainly been helpful to me. I am NOT an expert or a professional hatcher, nor am I a scientist; I simply hatch several batches of ducklings every season and hope to get better at it as time goes on. I hope you find this helpful. Welcome to the world of ducklings.

**On receiving hatching eggs:** When you get your eggs, store them overnight in a cool room, pointed side down, and then bring them up to room temperature before putting them under your broody (usually a bantam or hen that is nesting as ducks are less prone to broodiness) or into the incubator. Make sure the eggs are not cracked (candling is helpful to check for hairline cracks) before putting in the incubator.

**Incubation:** Your incubator should be brought up to 37.4 - 37.6 degrees celsius, and then you have two choices: **1. wet incubation** put plenty of water in the channels provided (keep this topped up – usually every 2 days). Do follow the instructions that come with your incubator as every one has its quirks. **2. dry incubation** which I do, so I don't put any water in the incubator channels at all. Aylesbury and Shetland ducks have an average incubation period of 28 days, but experience tells me this can be 26 –31 days within a single batch. Many folk swear by putting the eggs in the incubator pointed side down if the design of the box allows this, and I try to do that where possible. Don't cram the eggs in too tight or the dividers might crack the shell. Do check that the incubator is working each day – if a fuse blows or you have a power cut etc it can all go for a ball of chalk if you don't deal with it fairly swiftly (within a couple of hours). I keep my incubators in a cool, dark room, with a steady temperature, but have also hatched in a sunny kitchen...keeping the internal temperature steady is the thing.

**Candling and testing for fertility:** At 5-7 days you can candle your eggs to see if they are fertile. You should be able to see a little nucleus with red veins radiating outwards. If you have any clear eggs, throw them out now. Check again in another week, and again in week three. If you see a red ring or big black spot it means that the eggs have stopped developing or died in shell; get rid of those too. There are some great images/examples here:

<http://shilala.homestead.com/candling.html>

<http://www.backyardchickens.com/LC-candling.html>

Egg weighing is also a good way of tracking development but I've never done it (not great at monitoring statistics), and advice about that is in the Brinsea



incubation handbook downloadable for free here:

<http://www.brinsea.co.uk/information/free-downloads/39/>

**Hatching:** This can be trickier for ducklings than for chicks, so for those experienced with poultry, waterfowl are a bit more demanding. The crucial factor is attaining adequate humidity. If you have a gauge, 65% is the absolute minimum and in my experience too low, and much more (80% plus) is better and recommended in the last days. Good information about this can be found here: <http://www.duckhealth.com/hatchduck.html> . The cheapest method of testing humidity is using a wet bulb thermometer, but fancy and expensive systems are available.

Two days before hatching is due, stop your automatic cradle (if you have one), stop turning the eggs manually (if you don't) and remove any dividers. Make sure the water channels are full, and you can put in some small tall jam jars full of water (tall so that newly hatched ducklings can't topple in and drown), as in my incubators the water channels don't provide anything like enough evaporation/humidity for ducklings, but yours might. You cannot do this if your incubator is chockfull of eggs. You can use thick blotting or kitchen paper, soaked, with one end in the channel to wick the water, and some people use a soaked sponge (again if there is room). Don't forget to ensure adequate ventilation at this stage – again check your instructions - or you may get late death in shell. A helpful article on this is here – read to the end for the crucial bits: <http://www.domestic-waterfowl.co.uk/incubation.html>

These days, once the eggs have pipped (usually day 27) I move them from a forced air incubator to a still air incubator which I use solely as a hatcher. This does not have any humidity gauge, but I fill the channels with water.

**Be patient:** Don't be premature in chucking away eggs that haven't hatched after the majority of ducklings are under a heatlamp, safe in the brooder. Sometimes it's not death, but late hatching up to 72 hours after the first lot are out. Yes, some birds are out of their shell and bobbing about, fluffy and dry in 12 hours, some take much longer - patience is an irritating necessity with this activity (not one I'm good at). If you are concerned that the membrane is drying out round a semi hatched bird and it's sticking hard to the bird, DO intervene or it will suffocate - the membrane dries out (particularly in a fan driven incubator) and acts like deadly glue. But apart from this and removing any ducklings that are 12-24 hours old in batches, DON'T OPEN THE INCUBATOR UNLESS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY! If you do, you get rid of all that nice humidity you worked so hard to create. Leave a minimum of 6 hours between openings, and more is highly desirable, and if you have opened it, add more water to channels and remove any empty shells at that point.



Like many people who hatch a fair bit, I keep a separate incubator just for hatching, so keeping the others as clean and bacteria free as possible. I move the eggs to the hatcher at the point the eggs no longer need turning. This year I've successfully used a still air incubator/hatcher for this job (a Brinsea hatchmaker), that can take a lot of water in the base, as I found that the fan driven incubators I use for the first 25 days of incubation just dry things out too much at hatching time for ducklings.

As an example, in my last two batches I've hatched 11 out of 12, and every one was fertile at 7 and 21 days. And there was a gap of 4 days between the first and the last hatching in the second batch. That's nature (and external temperature changes) for you.

### **Brooding:**

From the incubator/hatcher put the ducklings in a brooder (home made, posh shop-bought or an adapted hamster cage or rabbit hutch etc) somewhere safe – away from cats, dogs, magpies and rats. I can't stress this enough – I lost 18 x week-old ducklings in one night from an outside shed that I thought was rat proof and wasn't. Rats can get through fairly narrow gauge mesh, so you may have to adapt your brooder if it's not in a 100% safe place. In the brooder your ducklings should be under heat for 2-3 weeks depending on the weather, and if the weather is warm, you can get away without heat during the day, towards the end of that period. Start the temperature at 32 degrees (a garden thermometer is good for checking this) and reduce by one degree a day by slightly raising the heatlamp. If they are clustering together you know they are too cold, if acting normally they are warm enough. I use a ceramic bulb rather than an infrared bulb in my heatlamp as there is less chance of splayed legs, and the ducklings get a more natural light pattern – ie it's dark at night, not 24 hours of red glare. Ceramic is the more expensive choice but I've found it to have a positive effect on the health of the ducklings.

**Rearing:** Make sure that the ducklings have access to drinking water in a purpose made drinker, but don't give them a bowl of water to swim in; until they start to feather up as they can easily drown as they don't produce their water repelling oil or weather proof feathers until they are a little older (ducklings raised naturally take on oils from their mother as she sits and grooms them). Feed ducklings on non-medicated chick crumbs or waterfowl crumbs if you can get them, for a few weeks, (an eggbox makes a cheap food container), then move onto growers pellets, then layers pellets as they mature (just like chicks/hens). From the beginning, make sure their food is close to their drinker. It is VERY messy and the brooder will need daily cleaning out (I use wood shavings on top of anti splay mats) but the ducklings need to have water to help the food go down; they tend to shovel some food, take a drink,



This is our home made brooder with narrow gauge weldmesh on the top and front. It has a narrow drawer at the base for ease of cleaning and the floor is made of aluminium sheeting. Because of the narrow gauge mesh we use this for newly hatched birds.



This is our bought brooder and has pros and cons – water and feed is kept out of the main body of the brooder which helps keep things clean, but the gauge is rather wide and although we've never had a rat attack inside it, I use this for the larger less vulnerable birds just in case. Although galvanised it's going rusty after about 5 years.

shovel food, drink again etc. Make sure their drinker is refreshed regularly and isn't clogged up with feed or sawdust, preventing access to the water. At four weeks old, now off heat, they can go outside, but again in a predator-proof pen and hut. Once they are 8 weeks old they need deep water to dip their heads into (shallow buckets are good, the rubber type for feeding horses), and preferably enough to swim in. Even if you are keeping the ducks for eggs and for fun rather than for meat, once they are mature (15-20 weeks) I strongly recommend culling surplus drakes; drakes do taste fabulous



and really tender at 20-25 weeks). If you can't face this, do give them to a friend, as one drake per six ducks is more than adequate, and a drake can cope with even more of a harem than that. If you have a good hatch of 10-12 ducks, you may want to keep 2 drakes max, one just in case the fox comes. The ducks really get beaten up if they are left with too many males - it's just not kind. As they mature the drake gets an unmistakable curl to his tail feather; he also sounds different to a duck, and a bit of practice will tell you all you need to know - see if you can find a local duck keeper to give you some hints.

Depending on the time of year, you may start getting duck eggs from 20-25 weeks. My Aylesbury ducks lay from February to September or later, and the Shetlands tend to lay all winter too, but this varies depending on the weather.

**Foot care:** Ducks can go lame if they need to step up and down, and heavy birds like the Aylesbury don't fly, so if there is a step into/out of your duck hut, do make sure you give them a gentle ramp to go in and out (chickens don't need this, although their chicks do). A ramp is also helpful into a pond or sink etc, and do put a large stone in any pond/sink so that they can get out again. They need clean straw once a week in their hut, and the old straw is fantastic on the compost heap. They need foxproof runs, grass, feed (layers pellets, corn etc), adequate housing and water. They must be shut up at night or the fox will get them – it's just a matter of time - and foxes can take full-grown ducks in the morning or the afternoon as well as at dusk, so do check your fences – it is arduous to foxproof a whole garden or paddock but a necessity in most places.

**Books:** I can strongly recommend this book, I found it absolutely invaluable for all kinds of livestock info when I was starting out - worth every penny and often much better than a book focussing on a single species:

[The complete book of raising livestock and poultry](#): Katie Thear. This is also good: [Ducks and Geese at Home](#). Michael Roberts and this: [Poultry and Waterfowl Problems](#). Michael Roberts

and if you like something comprehensive and very good at explaining the detail, this is super: [Storeys Guide to Raising Ducks](#). Dave Holderread.

If there are any FAQs I've not dealt with, let me know and I'll add the information, if I know the answer!

**Debbie**

[Debbie@southyeofarmwest.co.uk](mailto:Debbie@southyeofarmwest.co.uk)