

# Free Range Goose Production



## Introduction

The rearing of geese can be a profitable enterprise on a farm. The use and manipulation of lighting programmes for all-year-round breeding brought great benefits to the poultry industry but geese have not responded to the same extent as chicken and turkeys. Consequently, they continue to have a short breeding season. Goslings are most readily available from spring through to late summer. Goslings can be purchased directly from a licensed hatchery at day old. Improved crosses of geese are available that give better results in terms of weight gain and feed conversion efficiency than the traditional breeds. Goose meat is a luxury priced food when compared with any of the other poultry meats. The term free range has a specific meaning defined at European Union level and broadly, may only be used where geese:

- have access to at least 4m<sup>2</sup>/ bird open air grass run during half of their lifetime
- are reared for 16 weeks or more
- are given adequate house space or a stocking density not exceeding 15Kg /m<sup>2</sup>
- are allowed pop-holes of 4metres /100m<sup>2</sup> of floor space as exits to the range or grass area.
- are fed a fattening ration with at least 70% of cereals

## Housing

Goslings are easy to rear once their basic needs are provided for. The house can be of simple construction providing shelter, clean dry bedding and protection from predators. Chopped straw or white wood shavings make good bedding. A brooding area with a heat source is essential for the first few weeks. This area should be clean, disinfected, dry and pre-heated to a brooding temperature of 35/38<sup>0</sup>C when the goslings arrive. This temperature is lowered gradually and goslings can be weaned off heat as young as ten days or as late as four weeks depending on weather conditions. Behaviour of the goslings will indicate if they are warm enough and when the brooder can be dispensed with. Goslings rely on their feathers for protection from cold wet weather and should be confined to the house until they grow their first feathers as they can quickly get chilled from wet grass or heavy rain. They also need protection from strong sunshine to prevent sunburn.

## Pointers for Flock Management

Recognise from the outset that geese enter the human food chain directly and that every process in their rearing and presentation to the consumer must be carried out with food safety as a priority.

- Prepare a section of the house as a brooding area. A brooder for 100 chickens will heat a space for 25/30 goslings.
- Set up feeders and drinkers - tube feeders and standard automatic bell drinkers are adequate. Provide one automatic drinker per 50 geese and one feeder per 30. Supplement the feeders and drinkers for the first few days to get the goslings off to a good start.



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*This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.*

*All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website*

<http://www.teagasc.ie/>

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Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources

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- Provide fresh clean drinking water, in moveable drinkers, out on range.
  - Very low light intensity from 2 weeks of age is essential to prevent feather stripping.

If a goose ration is not available goslings will thrive on a chick starter ration for the first 6 weeks and a limited amount of growers ration combined with paddock grazing and cereals in the later growth phase. Some inclusions in poultry rations, particularly anti-coccidials are **not** suitable for geese – check with supplier.

- While good geese strains can be finished for the table at 12 weeks, free-range geese must be reared to at least 16 weeks so the feeding regime can be more leisurely.
- Geese slaughter should be linked to their feather growth. Experience gained from the Teagasc, free range goose unit at Athenry, slaughtering at 20 weeks gives a good finish and good results.
- Allow the geese out on range from 4 / 6 weeks onwards.
- Geese are natural grazers and enjoy good grass. On range, they present no major management problems and can be confined easily with a fence. Confine the birds gradually to a more restricted range for the final 2 weeks using only a very small paddock for the last four days of life. This facilitates plucking.
- Geese have a tendency to crowd, so handle with care to prevent smothering or bruising.

### Marketing

The market is specialised and should be secured before investing in a goose enterprise. Geese will be presented ready to cook. They can be humanely killed by stunning and dislocation of the neck or by cutting the carotid artery. Dry plucking is slow and tedious but gives a good finish when combined with wax plucking. Wet plucking is fast and efficient but the birds will have a short shelf life. Geese must be prepared in food grade premises and comply with Food Hygiene Regulations and/or EU Directives.

### Economics

Where existing facilities can be utilised, geese production, even in relatively small numbers, can supplement farm income.

It is important to be aware that:

- Day old goslings can cost €5.50 - €7.50 each depending on size of order.
- Weight loss from liveweight to oven-ready weight is high – up to 32%.

Results from Teagasc Athenry show that by supplementing the diet with grazing and cereals, feed consumption was held to 24kg of compound feed per bird. The stocking density on range was much less intensive than the prescribed minimum. Average liveweight was 7.8Kg. it is reasonable to expect a gross margin of €9 + per bird (after rearing and processing costs but excluding fixed costs and interest on borrowed capital).