

FREE-RANGE GOOSE PRODUCTION

Introduction



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The rearing of geese can be a profitable enterprise on a farm. In many other areas of poultry, the use of artificial heating and lighting has led to year-round production. However, this is not the case for the production of geese. Geese are generally hatched from February to June. Birds are then slaughtered from St Michael's Day (September 29) to Christmas Day.

Goslings can be purchased directly from a licensed hatchery at a day old. Improved crossbreeds of geese are available that give better results in terms of weight gain and feed conversion efficiency than the traditional breeds.

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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 4m²/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/m²;
- are allowed pop-holes of 4m/100m² of floor space as exits to the range or grass area; and,
- are fed a fattening ration, with at least 70% cereals.

All geese produced in Ireland could be termed free range. Approximately 11,000-15,000 geese are consumed at Christmas each year.

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 two to four weeks. This area should be clean, disinfected, and dry. It should be pre-heated to a brooding temperature of 35-38°C when the goslings arrive. This temperature is lowered gradually. Goslings are not heat independent until they are approximately four weeks of age, and cannot regulate their own heat.

However, this does not mean that heat must be provided. Limiting the supply of water at night for weeks three and four can be sufficient. 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.

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Pointers for flock management



Food safety must be a priority when rearing geese.

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), and provide fresh clean drinking water, in moveable drinkers, out on range; and,
- very low light intensity from two 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 six weeks and a limited amount of grower 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 are usually slaughtered at approximately 7-10kg – the New York

Marketing

The market is specialised and should be secured before investing in a goose enterprise. Geese will be presented oven-ready or as New York dressed. 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. Goslings can be purchased at four days old for €7.90 each.

dressed goose (not oven ready) is usually 7kg;

- allow the geese out on range from four to six 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 two weeks, using only a very small paddock for the last four days of life (this facilitates plucking); and,
- geese tend to crowd, so handle with care to prevent smothering or bruising.

Further information

For further information please contact Rebecca Tierney, Poultry Advisor at:

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The following resources are also helpful:

www.agriculture.gov.ie/

www.bordbia.ie/

www.teagasc.ie/ruraldev


AGRICULTURE AND FOOD DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
www.teagasc.ie