



# ducks



*Khaki Campbells – two drakes and a duck.*

## what are they?

They're waterfowl, like geese, but generally smaller. They don't graze like geese, but eat insects, slugs and snails (as well as bought compound feed). There are lots of domestic breeds – some kept for eggs, some for meat, some for both, and some are just decorative, or kept as pets. Most people keep ducks for eggs. There are also many species of wild duck, of course.

The most popular egg-laying duck is the Khaki Campbell, which can lay up to 250 eggs per year – more than most chickens. This varies a lot depending on the breed. With Aylesbury ducks, you'd be lucky to get 100 eggs per year. Indian runners can produce 200 per year, but they're a popular show duck, so breeders often look for shape rather than utility, so nowadays most Indian runners tend to produce only around 150 eggs per year (they're very entertaining though).

Ducks have been domesticated in the UK for much longer than chickens, as they are native. Chickens were brought over by the Romans, and their ancestors were originally from South Asia. All domestic ducks have an ancestry that stretches back to wild Mallards (with the exception of the Muscovy duck).

## what are the benefits?

They can be very affectionate. They 'imprint' – i.e. if you raise them from when they hatch, as far as they're concerned, you're their parent. They will follow you around, and even defend you. This doesn't happen with chickens – ducks appear to be more intelligent and interested in doing things just for fun. It's the reason that ducks raised for meat often end up dying of old age.

They can also be used for pest control – let them onto the veg patch before sowing or after harvest (otherwise they'll trample your plants) and they'll Hoover up all the slugs and snails, which is, of course, a source of free food for them. They'll do a bit of weed clearance as well.

Duck eggs have a stronger flavour than chickens' eggs – the yolk is very rich. Some people prefer them, but most prefer chickens' eggs. They're especially good in baking and for scrambled eggs. They also contain more protein, calories, vitamins and minerals than chickens' eggs, so they're good value – although they also contain more saturated fat.

## what can I do?

If you know someone who keeps ducks, ask if you can hang out, help and talk. Books are great for theory, but there's nothing like hands-on experience. Then you can find local duck breeders to buy ducks or fertile eggs. Search online for local duck breeders in your county. You can pick up Aylesbury ducks (meat) or Khaki Campbells (eggs) easily, but you may have to go a bit further afield for specialist breeds. Call ducks can be loud, so maybe not the best choice if you have close neighbours. Aylesbury and Indian runner ducks don't fly, but some breeds do (like call ducks, and in some cases, Campbells), so have to have their wings clipped if you don't want them to disappear. As a beginner, it's probably best to get ducks at 16-18 weeks. If you buy fertile eggs, you'll need an incubator or a broody hen to hatch them.

If you have a bit of experience, you could breed your own, for which you'll need a drake. Ducks



*Duck egg compared to a chicken's and a quail's egg.*

## ducks



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*Aylesbury ducks take a bath.*

often give up on looking after their eggs, so you often get better results putting the eggs under a broody hen. Ducks hang out well with chickens. They don't amalgamate into one flock, but they don't fight either. You can keep one drake for every 6-8 ducks. Male ducks establish a pecking order, but they don't fight much – they're not as aggressive as cockerels.

If you want to keep ducks, you have to be prepared for a bit of mess. Chickens produce 70% of their manure at night, so it's all in one place, in the coop, and it's reasonably solid, so it can be swept up and deposited on the compost heap easily. But ducks poo all day, anywhere they feel like it, and it's much wetter. So you might have muck brought into the house on shoes – especially if you have kids. It's still good for the compost heap / garden / allotment though.

Ducks need about as much space as chickens – if they're in a pen, they need a minimum of 4m<sup>2</sup> per animal, and if they're completely free-range, they need to be protected from foxes – and this is even more essential in cities. Lock them up at night to keep them safe – in a house with a flat floor, not a perch. This could be an old dog kennel. Put straw on the floor and sweep it out regularly and add to the compost heap. You can provide nest boxes for them to lay their eggs, and they may or may not use them – they might just lay their eggs anywhere they like, and you have to find them.

They don't need a pond, as long as they have a bath of water (maybe an old baby bath) to splash about in. Fill the bath with a hose – enough to allow them to paddle in, and change the water every day. If you do have a pond, that's great, as

they do like them, but they'll make the water and the sides of the pond messy and muddy. A point to remember is that ducks mate on water, so if you want to breed your own, you will need a pond.

You can buy mash or pellets to feed your ducks from agricultural suppliers. This is commercial compound feed, made of various grains. Avoid soya if you can – you can get compound feeds that don't contain soya. They're more expensive, but soya production is very damaging. Make sure the food you give them isn't powdery or sticky, as it can clog their nostrils. It's illegal to give ducks waste food, even if you're not selling the eggs – although some still do, depending on what it is and how fresh it is. You can make your own feed with chopped, raw, fresh vegetables, or boiled potatoes with oatmeal and some greens is good too.

Ducks tend to be quite healthy, and suffer from fewer problems than chickens – see our links page for information on duck ailments and what to do about them. It's good to de-worm them twice a year – in autumn and spring. Talk to your agricultural supplier or vet for the best products.

There's no noise problem with ducks. There tends to be a low-level burbling sound which is quite pleasant. Your neighbours would have to be quite grumpy to be annoyed by it.

You have to register with DEFRA and standard regulations apply if you keep more than 50 ducks / hens or a mix of both. There are no regulations for people keeping fewer than 50 birds.

You can sell your eggs at the 'farm gate' – which applies even if your gate is on a terraced house in town; but you're not allowed to grade them or sell them through a shop without registration. You can allow people to pick their own, however, so they choose whether to buy large or small eggs.

## resources

- [lowimpact.org/ducks](http://lowimpact.org/ducks) for more info, courses, links, books, including:
  - Jeremy Hobson, *Backyard Ducks & Geese*
  - Chris & Mike Ashton, *the Domestic Duck*
  - Katie Thear, *Starting With Ducks*
- [waterfowl.org.uk](http://waterfowl.org.uk) – British Waterfowl Assoc.
- [domestic-waterfowl.co.uk](http://domestic-waterfowl.co.uk) – Domestic Waterfowl Club of Great Britain
- [poultrykeeper.com](http://poultrykeeper.com) – lots of articles and information on ducks, chickens and geese
- [newagrarian.com/category/ducks](http://newagrarian.com/category/ducks) – lots of excellent information

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