



Celebrating the Goose: Raising Geese

Geese not only serve as traditional holiday meals, but they make friendly farm pets, alert sentinels and lovely lawn mowers.

Photo by Cherie Langlois

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A partridge, turtle doves, French hens, swans, geese: Have you ever wondered why the anonymous person who composed The Twelve Days of Christmas left out the turkey, that feathered behemoth so many people gobble up during the holidays?

Well for one, this carol—though first printed in 1780—is thought to date back to the Middle Ages; a native of America, the turkey didn't debut in Europe until around 1519.

In those long ago days, goose, swan and wild game shone as the main attractions during the bountiful celebrations of the wealthy.

Live poultry made popular Christmas gifts, and the most valuable of fowl was probably the goose—a hardy bird that could live primarily off grass, be driven to market in flocks, and provide a rich food source for an often-hungry populace.

Hopefully most hobby farmers don't teeter on the brink of starvation the way medieval peasants did, but that doesn't mean our farms can't benefit from the addition of some geese. Today's geese are still easy to care for and good to eat. They can make friendly farm pets, alert "watchdogs," and lovely lawn mowers.

So move over Tom Turkey—this holiday season we're celebrating the not-so-silly, under-utilized goose.

Geese Through the Ages

Because geese adapt easily to different climates and to life in captivity, it's not surprising that these robust waterfowl were probably one of the first animals domesticated by man.

Photo by Cherie Langlois

Geese are social birds that usually get along with other livestock, from chickens to goats to donkeys. Archeological evidence places domestic geese in Egypt at least 3,000 years ago, and sacred flocks occupied ancient Greek and Roman temples. After Rome's fall, geese continued to be important domestic fowl in Europe throughout the Middle Ages and into Victorian times. English communities held goose fairs in the autumn, when the birds were at their fattest.

Geese went to America, where they earned their keep on homesteads by supplying meat, fat, eggs, down and feathers. With the advent of commercial chicken and turkey farming, however, the number of domestic geese sadly declined.

The wild Greylag of Europe (*Anser anser*) gave rise to most domestic goose breeds, including the white Embden, curly-feathered Sebastopol and gray Toulouse. Breeds that trace their ancestry to the Greylag tend to have short, muscular necks with deeply furrowed feathers. The Chinese and African geese, strikingly different with their head knobs, descended from the Asian Swan goose (*Anser cygnoides*).

In their 2001 Standard of Perfection, the American Poultry Association lists nine domestic breeds. They also list two wild species popular with waterfowl enthusiasts because of their beauty: the Canada, a type of Brant, and the small but feisty Egyptian—not a true goose, but a relative of the Shelduck.

Save the Geese

A 2000 census by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC) found four domestic goose breeds critically endangered, each with fewer than 500 breeding birds: the American Buff, Pilgrim, Pomeranian and Roman. The ALBC classified the Sebastopol as rare (fewer than 1,000) and placed the African, Chinese and Toulouse in the Watch category (fewer than 5,000). If you're serious about adding geese to your farm, consider one of the threatened breeds listed above.

For more information contact the ALBC: (919) 542-5704, <http://www.albc-usa.org/>; or The Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities: (619) 938-9675. Domestic geese range in size from the hefty Embden gander, weighing up to 30 pounds, to the petite Egyptian, which weighs a mere five pounds. Ganders (adult males) tend to be slightly larger than geese and will often put themselves between their mate and any perceived threat, but the sexes can still be difficult to



differentiate, except for the Pilgrim breed.

The most accurate way to determine gender in most breeds is by vent sexing, a delicate procedure that involves restraining the gosling or goose so its cloaca can be carefully inverted to show the sex organs. Beginners beware: Don't try this without the guidance of an experienced waterfowl breeder or you could injure your geese.

Beyond Stereotypes

Like blondes and computer software engineers, certain farm animals continue to be victims of stereotyping. All goats stink and eat tin cans. All sheep have the intelligence of a potato. All geese honk loud enough to wake the dead and attack humans on sight. Well, best throw out those old myths.

"Whatever you say about geese with conviction, they'll make a liar out of you," says Dave Holderread, a goose raiser since 1961 and author of *The Book of Geese: A Complete Guide to Raising the Home Flock* (1981). "They're very much like people, but on a less sophisticated level."

The Useful Goose

Your geese probably won't make you rich by laying golden eggs, but they can earn their keep by supplying the following farm products and services:

Eggs: Good for scrambling and baking. Try marketing extras to egg sculptors and artists. **Meat:** Darker, richer, more tender than turkey. A 3.5 ounce serving of roasted goose with skin has 305 calories, 25 grams of protein, 22 grams of fat. **Down/Feathers:** Valuable for comfy pillows and light, insulating comforters. **Grass trimming/weeding:** Once used to weed a variety of crops, geese are again becoming popular weeders as organic methods catch on (they fertilize, too). **Fertilized eggs/breeding stock:** "If you raise purebreds or rare breeds, you can usually get a pretty good price for them, depending on your area of the country," notes Dave Holderread, a waterfowl breeder who focuses on preserving rare varieties at his Oregon farm. Geese possess terrific eyesight, good memories and raucous voices—attributes that make for excellent sentinels. They also love a set routine. "In general, if there's not something riling them up, geese aren't that noisy," notes Holderread, who currently keeps around 1,000 ducks and geese at his Waterfowl Preservation Center and Farm in Corvallis, Ore.

Holderread often sells geese to people who want them to be vocal enough to announce the presence of predators or prowlers. Some breeds have a reputation for being noisier and more sensitive to intruders—the Chinese and Africans, for instance. But you can't always judge a goose by its breed. Holderread recalls trying to talk one woman out of purchasing Brown Chinese geese because she lived in a development. She had her heart set on this breed, however, and he finally relented and sold her a pair. Months later, a next-door neighbor came to visit the owner, looked outside, and exclaimed, "Oh, you've got geese!" The neighbor had never heard them. On another occasion, he sold some Pilgrims (considered a quieter breed) to another customer who subsequently complained they were too noisy. It turned out the geese were gossiping with another flock down the road.

If you have talkative geese, you can install (or grow) a barrier to force the sound upward rather than into your neighbor's open bedroom window. Lou Horton, a waterfowl breeder and show judge in West Chicago, covered his chainlink fence with stockade fencing to keep his 35 Toulouse from annoying nearby residents.

The Nature of Geese

When considering geese for your farm, remember their large size and strength can make them difficult birds to handle. They can be messy, casting feathers far and wide during molting season and producing plenty of manure, warns Trisha Tank, who raises rare heritage breeds like the Pilgrim, Pomeranian, and American Buff at her farm in Felton, Minn. The trade-off? Your lawn and pasture will glow greener than any of the manicured, herbicide- and pesticide-fed lawns in town.

A Gaggle of Geese: Types to Raise

African: These massive geese sport prominent knobs on their foreheads and dewlaps beneath their jaws. The colored variety has gray, brown, buff and white plumage.

American Buff: A medium-large goose developed in America, this breed displays rich, buff-colored feathers with white lacing on the back and sides.

Chinese: This small, productive layer possesses a slim, graceful neck and a knob on its forehead. The white variety has orange legs and bill; the gray is similar in color to the African.

Emden: These are big, pure white geese and the most common breed raised commercially in the United States. The Emden has blue eyes and an upright stance.



Pilgrim: Described as quiet and calm, this is the only breed where the gander and goose can be easily distinguished by color—males are mostly white; females are gray.

Pomeranian: Originating in Germany, these geese come in gray, white and a flashy combination of the two called Saddleback (Buff Saddlebacks also occur).

Roman Tufted: This diminutive, usually white goose has blue eyes and a roundish tuft of feathers crowning its head.

Sebastopol: Curly, plumed feathers decorate this unusual old breed. They come in white and buff varieties.

Toulouse: A primarily gray goose of French origin that varies from large to massive. The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy recognizes three varieties: Production, Standard Dewlap and Exhibition. The Society for the Preservation of Poultry Antiquities considers the Production Toulouse to be a separate breed, the Gray goose. Geese are social, intelligent birds that tend to get along with other livestock, from chickens to donkeys. They do get ornery during the breeding season, but that doesn't mean these fowl deserve to be characterized as barnyard fiends.

"We just adore our geese, they're so friendly," says Tank, noting that friends and relatives who remember being chased by geese as children are always impressed by her flock's pleasant temperaments. "The geese come up and chat with us; they eat treats out of our hands. Maybe it's because we're always calm around them and don't act aggressive toward them."

Jody Workman, of Way to Me Acres in Bennet, Neb., was also pleasantly surprised when she purchased her first Sebastopol goose. "I always pictured geese as being aggressive, but the Sebastopols are very quiet natured. I haven't had any trouble with them chasing people," she says.

Your Flock's Health

Just call them the cows of the poultry world: Geese truly love to graze on succulent, young-bladed grasses (they're not as keen on broad-leaved plants). If you're blessed with good pasture, a chemical-free lawn, or grassy orchard, your geese will forage for much of their own food during part of the year, requiring less concentrated feed and thus saving you money. But geese can't live on grass alone. You'll need to provide a nutritionally balanced ration—either a commercial pellet or custom blend—particularly when adequate forage isn't available, but also at other important times.

"What's critical to remember is that, just like a human, a goose eats differently at different stages of its life," says Holderread. He recommends feeding waterfowl starter, if possible, to baby geese. For his own brooder-reared goslings, he grows rye grass to supplement their diet. "Goslings get bored if they just eat grain, since they'd normally spend a lot of time eating grass. Without grass, they'll start chewing on each other."

Once geese mature, you can give them a waterfowl maintenance ration or game bird flight conditioner. Workman serves up Purina Duck Chow for her Sebastopol geese, along with treats of lettuce and bread. When breeding season rolls around, geese should receive a layer or breeder feed, says Holderread. Just beware of giving a layer ration more than three to four weeks before they start laying—a possible recipe for health problems.

Like other fowl, geese require grit to grind up grain in their gizzards and an adequate calcium supply—usually present in concentrated diets—when they're laying eggs. They also need plenty of fresh drinking water in containers deep enough for them to submerge their heads. Though swimming facilities aren't a requirement for keeping geese, they definitely appreciate a pond or hard plastic wading pool to cavort in.

Protection for the Flock

As for housing, a flock's needs are simple: some natural or man-made shade during sweltering weather; shelter from severe wind, rain and snow; and secure fencing to protect them from predators. Horton reports that his Toulouse prefer staying outside in their fenced enclosures rather than inside a building, but during the cold Chicago winter nights he drives them into a barn layered with straw. Workman, on the other hand, provides her Sebastopol flock with a number of lodging choices: a kid's play house, an insulated plastic dog house, a truck canopy, and barn stall. "Our geese handle the Nebraska winters just fine," she says. "The weather doesn't seem to bother them as long as they have a protective place from the wind and snow."

Although grown geese can fend off predators better than chickens or ducks, most domestic breeds don't fly well and even the crankiest goose is no match for a pack of roaming canines. Unattended eggs and goslings can be snatched up by raccoons, skunks and other predators. Tank employs a Great Pyrenees dog to guard her geese and other livestock, while Holderread locks his birds into a fenced yard at night for protection. Horton safeguards his Toulouse flock with a six-foot-high chainlink fence that keeps larger predators, like coyotes, out. "Anything smaller than a coyote will usually leave a full grown heavy-weight goose alone," he says.

Given a proper diet, good care and protection from marauders, geese can live well into their teens and even their 20s,



depending on the breed. To protect your flock from avian diseases like botulism and aspergillosis, avoid giving them access to stagnant water sources or moldy feed and litter. To prevent crippling injuries, never grab geese by their legs or chase them across uneven ground when it comes time to capture them. Fresh, absorbent bedding in shelters, roost and nest sites will help your birds' feathers stay clean and healthy. Holderread keeps antibiotic ointment on hand for wounds and treats his geese twice a year to prevent tracheal worms, a potentially deadly parasite that can cause symptoms like head shaking, coughing and rattling breath. "In general, ducks and geese are more resistant to disease than other poultry, especially when raised in small flocks," he says.

Mother and Father Goose

In his book, *The Year of the Greylag Goose* (1978), ethologist Konrad Lorenz said that he was often asked why he'd made this species the subject of such extensive studies. "There are many reasons," he writes. "But the most important is that Greylag geese exhibit a family existence that is analogous in many significant ways to human family life."

Like their wild ancestor and many humans, most domestic geese form enduring, often life-long bonds with their chosen mates (no soaring divorce rates here, however) ... or whoever else is around, as Workman discovered with her first three Sebastopols. When Madam Goose suddenly died, the two remaining ganders bonded during the two years it took her to acquire a pair of female Sebastopols. "I thought these boys would fall all over themselves when I introduced the ladies, but they weren't interested at all—they were perfectly happy with each other. I ended up buying boys for the females!" she says.

During the nesting season the female goose will line a depression in the ground or straw with vegetation and down before laying up to 15 large, white eggs. Some breeders remove the eggs for artificial incubation or shipment to sellers, while other raisers let the goose do the sitting. She'll patiently incubate her clutch for about 28 to 30 days while the gander stands guard. When the adorably fuzzy goslings struggle from their eggs, both parents take on the roles of caregiver and protector.

"Geese have very strong parental instincts," explains Horton. "On several occasions I've given goslings to pairs that weren't their parents and had them adopt the goslings. I've even had lone ganders adopt young."

For a flock's keeper, however, this powerful instinct can be both blessing and curse. Geese are capable of inflicting painful pinches with their beaks and some serious pummeling with their wings. Most geese are more aggressive during the breeding season and some breeds like the Egyptian tend to be nastier than others, says Horton. His gentler Toulouse put on an impressive display of hissing when he approaches their nests, though they've never bitten him. "It's all show, and their aggressive behavior disappears after the breeding season," he says.

Your best bet? Give Mother and Father Goose plenty of personal space during this emotional time. Be careful not to baby imprinted geese too much and never back down or walk away from a goose on the rampage, cautions Holderread.

Although geese are adept at nurturing their young, goslings can sometimes get left behind during outings with their parents and become victims of hypothermia or predators. To avoid this problem, Workman puts mother and young in a small pen for two weeks while the gander keeps guard outside. "When I let the mother and babies out, all the rest of the geese come running and honking," says Workman. "It's like a reunion, like they're saying 'Come join us, you're part of the family!' They're so welcoming and protective as a community. If only people could be that way!"

About the Author: Cherie Langlois is a freelance writer and former bird keeper who plans to add some geese to her Washington hobby farm next spring.

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