



Hatching eggs at home can be a fun project for those looking to grow their backyard flocks. Incubating duck eggs is a 28-day process and requires an egg incubator to help control temperature, humidity and egg turning.

Keep reading for a step-by-step guide to hatching eggs at home:

**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, with 65% relative humidity.

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.

**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.

**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.

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. **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.

**Brooding:** From the incubator/hatcher put the ducklings in a brooder somewhere safe – away from cats, dogs, magpies and rats. 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, reduce by one degree a day by slightly raising

the heat lamp. If they are clustering together you know they are too cold, if acting normally they are warm enough.

**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. Feed ducklings on non-medicated chick crumbs or waterfowl crumbs if you can get them, for a few weeks, 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 but the ducklings need to have water to help the food go down; they tend to shovel some food, take a drink.

Hatching eggs can be a very rewarding experience with proper planning and equipment. Remember to test all equipment before fertilised eggs arrive and set up the brooder as hatch day approaches.

Keep a watchful eye on temperature and humidity inside the incubator and invite friends and family over to watch the hatch. Everyone will be enthralled! Best of all, enjoy the new flock members you have had the privilege of raising from birth.

Good Luck!

Pete and Flis - Bisley Birds

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