

Where Ducks Are Just Like Kids

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and takes care of the dressing and marketing of the ducklings. The company also has a duck veterinarian who checks on the flocks periodically. Payment is based on price per pound, and paid every two weeks.

Although chickens and ducks are both birds, the Hollingers said, "Ducks are natured completely different than chickens."

When the Hollingers list the comparison, ducks come out on top every time.

They find the ducklings humorous to watch. Ducks can't fly over barriers. They have no problem with pesty flies. And, ducks are disease resistant.

"Ducks are super. They aren't time consuming to care for; they're docile, you don't need to vaccinate, and you can mix ages," Luke said.

Ducks do need to be debeaked. Debeaking is done at four weeks of age. It takes about two and a half hours to debeak 3,000 chickens.

Elmeta, who works for a dry cleaning business, helps with the debeaking, moving, and loading of the ducklings.

"It takes about six hours to load and debeak a batch," Elmeta said. "We start at 3 a.m. and are finished by 9 a.m."

When the Hollingers made the transition from chickens to ducks, they removed the cages used for the layers. They installed a vinyl coated wire floor on top of pressure treated 2x4s.

Previously some duck growers used litter instead of wire on the floor. But litter is prone to problems and is a breeding ground for bacteria and mold.

"Ducks are very sensitive to mold," said Luke, who keeps a sharp lookout for mold in feed and for any that might break off the housing environment.

Buyers want nice clean birds because the feathers are sold for use in down pillows and comforters.

"Wire works best for wet droppings. Those who use litter can't produce a clean bird," Luke said. The chicken houses were divided into four sections. Two sections are used as starting pens for the ducklings, which are delivered the day they are hatched. Two weeks later, the ducklings are walked into the next section called the growing

pen. After two weeks, they are walked into the finisher pen.

Moving the ducklings from one section to another is easy because the sections are on the same floor and are divided with plywood and a door. When it is time to move a flock, the door is opened. Elmeta slowly walks behind the ducks that move as one mass to the opened door.

"We must move slowly because ducks can't move fast," she said.

If moved too quickly, ducks may suffer heart attacks because they are not accustomed to exercise although they do have a large open room in which to move.

Ducks drink lots of water. An ozone system is used for water purification. Feeders and water troughs designed for ducks are not available for purchase. Luke, who prides himself in constructing whatever is needed, designed waterers from polyvinylchloride (PVC) pipe and feeders from used plastic 20-gallon drums.

"I like to take stuff that people discard and resurrect it," Lloyd said. He's known to attain many lawn mowers in that fashion.

Because ducks are waterfowl, condensation forms from the breath of the ducklings. Metal rusts quickly in this atmosphere.

The same manure pit cleaners used for the chickens works well for the ducklings to move the manure into a holding tank. A neighboring farmer spreads the manure on fields.

"I'm told duck manure is superior to cattle manure," Luke said. "We're really glad we have an outlet for it; otherwise, we couldn't raise ducks."

Mortality rate is low for ducks. No matter how cold temperatures drop, it doesn't seem to affect the ducklings. In fact, Luke said, the one section that has less heat from the heat lamps used, has resulted in less mortality than the warmer sections.

Hot weather is harder on the ducks and the mortality rate increases a bit during hot weather stretches. Large fans are used for cooling during hot weather months.

A formulated, computer-balanced duck ration is given to the ducklings. Started on pellets, the ducklings are switched to a growing ration and later a finishing ration.

For a duck that may become



Luke and Elmeta Hollinger stand in front of the chicken houses that they converted into duck pens, which hold 12,000 Peking ducks. Although chickens and ducks are both birds, the Hollingers said that ducks are natured completely different than chickens.

lame or exhibit some other disability, a small portion in the one pen is roped off for a duck hospital.

When ducks are spread out, they are satisfied and happy. Sometimes Luke walks through the ducks to spread them out a bit more as they tend to be passive and not move around much.

The Hollingers have four adult children and 10 grandchildren for which they added a large all-purpose room their home in order to accommodate many family gatherings. Luke is a Sunday school superintendent and Elmeta is active in the women's ministry at their church. She also plays the organ.

The couple have a cottage at Landisville Campgrounds, about an hour's drive away. During the summer months, they often spend weekends there, but Luke usually returns to sleep with his ducklings.

Although a son who lives nearby will care for the ducklings, Luke is reluctant to stay away overnight.

"The ducks are just like my children. I feel better when I'm sleeping at home with them. If I go away, I always have the ducks in back of mind just like they're my kids. I keep calling home to see how they're doing."

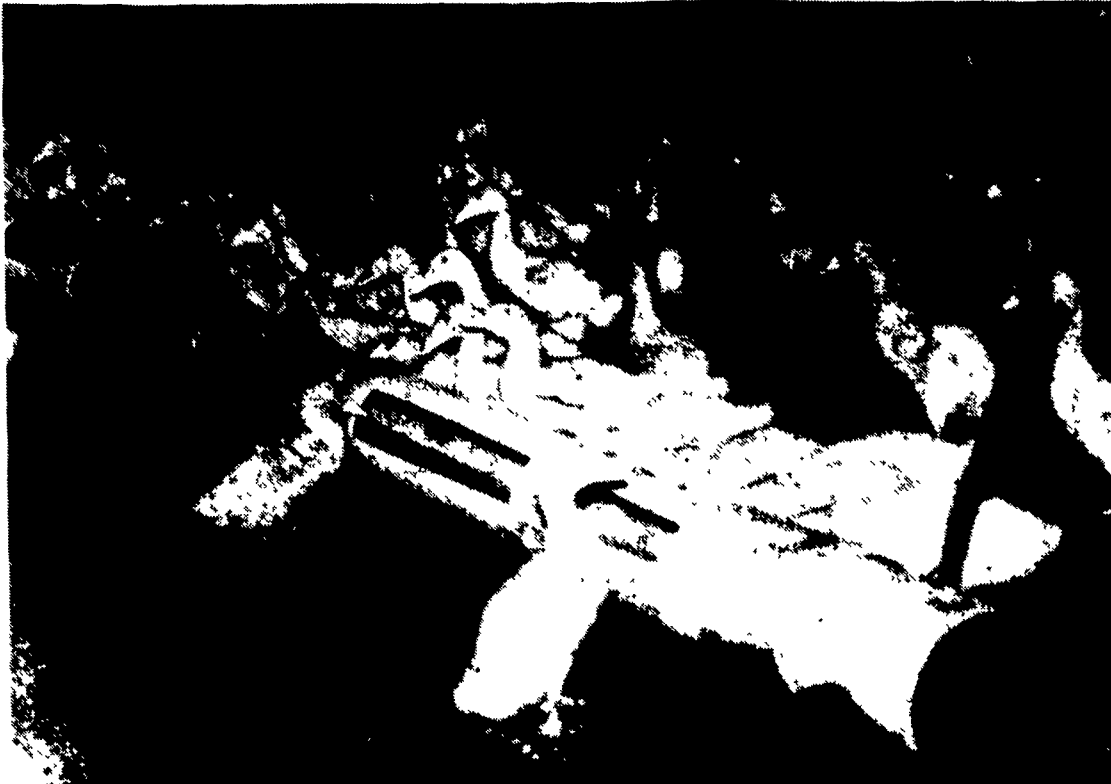


Elmeta holds a newly-hatched duckling. At four weeks of age, the ducks will be debeaked.

Luke, who will be 65, will retire from his full-time job as a cabinet maker next year.

"But I'll keep tending my ducks."

I love getting up in the morning and having something to tend. It's in my blood. I miss it if it's not there," he said.



Feeders and water troughs designed for ducks are not available for purchase. Luke, used polyvinylchloride (PVC) pipe and used plastic 20-gallon drums to construct feeders and waterers.

Homestead Notes
