

OTHER POULTRY KEPT FOR MEAT or FEATHER PLUCKING

Current situation

Turkeys, Ducks and Geese

Turkeys, ducks and geese are all farmed for meat and turkeys are the most common intensively reared species.

Turkey breeding has focussed mainly on the largest and fastest growing birds and as a result there is evidence of severe leg problems in both meat and breeding turkeys. This can particularly be the case for large male turkeys in standard production, which can suffer from lameness, leg deformities and/or hip problems.

Given the chance, turkeys still display the same wide range of grooming, feeding, courtship and anti-predator behaviours as their wild ancestors. However, the crowded and barren conditions in which they are kept restrict the opportunity to perform exploratory behaviours such as perching, ground pecking and foraging, and lead to increased aggression. Other welfare problems that can be associated with insufficient space include foot pad lesions and heat stress. Where there is a risk of feather pecking, which can cause injuries and sometimes lead to cannibalism, turkeys may be beak trimmed. This procedure reduces the risk of damage caused to other turkeys, but can be painful. The lighting may also be kept at very low levels to further reduce the risk of the problem, which can lead to blindness as well as preventing the birds from performing many of their normal behaviours.

Turkeys can experience considerable suffering if not handled carefully when they are caught at the end of rearing and put into transport crates, and during transport, such as bone fractures, bone breaks, dislocated hips and bruising.

In the EU27, the top five turkey meat producers and consumers are Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the UK, who produced 1.5 million tons in 2009 (total EU27: 1.75 million tons). In total, the EU produces 33% of the world turkey meat production and consumption amount to 34% of turkey meat consumption worldwide⁴³.

As ducks are waterfowl, they should be provided with access to hygienically managed open water sources, that enable them to carry out their water-related behaviours such as preening and head dipping. Unfortunately in current systems water is generally provided to ducks only for drinking, frequently through nipple drinkers. There are also concerns that commercial duck breeding may be heading in the direction of increasing the rate of growth of ducks beyond a level that is acceptable to welfare such as for meat chickens.

⁴³/Source : European Union - Poultry and Products Annual 2009 : <http://www.thepoultrysite.com/articles/1580/europe-an-union-poultry-and-products-annual-2009>

Duck meat production is much more modest, with about 450,000 tons duck meat produced in the EU27 in 2007⁴⁴.

Foie Gras

Pâté de foie gras is made from goose or duck livers. It is produced by force-feeding fully-grown birds with boiled maize mash mixed with fat. When this is done manually, a funnel is pushed down the bird's throat, and the mash is poured in and pushed down with an auger. The food exceeds what the bird would normally eat. Prior to force feeding, the birds are conditioned through diet to increase dilation of the throat, and the time they spend out doors is progressively reduced. The force feeding period lasts 12-15 days for ducks and 15-18 days for geese. Ducks are fed twice daily and geese three times. It takes about 60 seconds to deliver the feed by manual method, or a matter of 2-3 seconds using the computer-controlled pneumatic tube delivery units available on larger farms. The birds must be caught and restrained for feeding.

During the force-feeding period, ducks are mostly kept in small single cages, which do not allow them to stand erect, turn around or stretch their wings. Geese tend to be kept in groups. On some farms, the birds are kept in near-darkness all the time except when being force-fed. Insertion of the feeding funnel or tube is at the least a source of discomfort, and birds are seen to try to avoid the process. Throat injury and infection are a risk. Towards the end of the force-feeding period, the birds may suffer discomfort due to pressure of the enlarged liver within the abdomen, and there may also be leg pain. The livers have a high fat content and can be 6-10 times normal size. Although geese have traditionally been used for foie gras production, the most commonly kept species for force feeding today are male hybrids of the muscovy and the domestic duck.

France is both the main consumer and the main producer of foie gras within the EU. Other producers in the EU are Belgium, Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia.

Farmed Game Birds

Game birds such as quail, pheasant, partridge and pigeons are raised both for slaughter, when the end product is meat, and as quarry for commercially organised shoots. Intensive rearing of these birds for either purpose gives rise to welfare concerns similar to those for mass-market poultry species. In the case of birds which are reared intensively indoors and then released for shooting, there are additional problems relating to the birds' restricted ability to react and function as wild birds normally would. There can also be problems with feather pecking in these systems, which is often minimised by the use of bits, rather than consideration of environmental enrichment or stocking density for example. It can decrease the ability of birds to feed and preen properly and can cause pain and frustration. The breeding birds used in game bird production are sometimes kept in barren cages, with little opportunity to carry out natural behaviours or space to move around, which can lead to frustration and suffering.

Ratites (Ostriches, Rheas and Emus)

The ostrich is the most common of the farmed ratites in Europe. It has been farmed in South Africa since the 1860s, originally to meet demand for ostrich feathers. However, in the long term, the future of the ostrich farming industry will primarily be meat production, supplemented by sale of skins and feathers. Farmed ostriches have been selectively bred over some twenty generations, but are still largely thought of as wild animals.

The ratite farming industry has developed since the early 1980s in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Australia, Israel, China, Canada and the USA. European interest in ostrich farming dates from around 1989. Most producers are still relatively small scale. Commercial interest is stimulated by the low-fat, low cholesterol and high protein qualities of ostrich meat, but consumer demand has not been as great as expected and many farms have closed down. Ostrich hide is used for making handbags. The feathers are used in theatrical costumes and non-static dusters used in industrial manufacturing.

⁴⁴/Source : Statistics of the Food and Agriculture Organisation : <http://faostat.fao.org/site/569/default.aspx#ancor>

Keeping of ostriches or other ratites in Europe raises a number of animal welfare questions, not least as the conditions of life are very different from those to which they are naturally adapted. Ratites are not domesticated but still principally wild animals. In the northern European climate, shelter from wet weather is particularly important, as ostriches and emus lack preen glands and their feathers lack barbs, so that their plumage can become waterlogged. Secondly, there is still a lack of experience in keeping these birds, other than in zoos. Ostriches are particularly prone to disease and suffer high levels of stress. Air sac diseases are common when the birds are kept in close proximity under relatively intensive conditions. They are prone to Avian influenza strains. The development of ratite farming has been held back to some extent by the difficulty of rearing birds in the first few weeks after hatching. It is essential that proper welfare standards are set and implemented. There are still few slaughterhouses equipped to deal with ostriches, and no specific recommendations for appropriate methods. The harvesting of feathers must also be considered. Plucking of feathers from live birds, as is done in South Africa, causes discomfort, pain and distress. Removal of large feathers can cause bleeding and adds to the risk of infection. Harvesting feathers by clipping the non-growing shafts is painless, but taking away too many affects the bird's temperature control and can cause stress.

The way ostriches are caught, transported and slaughtered can also be a source of concerns.

Feather plucking

The plucking of feathers from birds is most commonly carried out with a view to use the down in the production of items such as pillows and duvets. In general, the production of down results from the removing of feathers after the birds have been slaughtered, but the practice of live plucking hasn't ceased as birds can be plucked up to four times during their lifespan and farmers can thus choose to maximise their down production by plucking live animals. Live plucking is most common with geese, which can be plucked every 7 to 8 weeks for a period of 8 months a year (February to October). Although the feathers plucked from the bird's breast area are the most valuable, very often all feathers are plucked leaving the bird without its natural protection. The plucking of geese can be considered hard labour and is generally only conducted in EU countries where labour is relatively cheap. In Europe, bird farmers in Hungary and Poland are considered to still widely practice live plucking, though Germany and France are also recognised to engage in live plucking. Plucking can be done manually or by making use of so-called dry or wet plucking machines. Live plucking undisputedly causes a lot of distress and physical suffering for the birds. They can be seen to violently resist the plucking and panicking which often results in sprains and other injuries. They also suffer from heavy bleeding. The procedure entails a large amount of stress for the animals and does away with the natural protection from nature's elements provided by their feathers, thereby increasing their susceptibility to diseases. Following this ordeal, the birds enter a phase of shock and have been found to suffer from fever and significant loss of appetite. The birds are administered with antibiotics both before and after the plucking. They are not sedated and no effort is taken to relieve their suffering.

Legislation

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe's Standing Committee of the *European Convention for the Protection of Farm Animals* has agreed recommendations concerning turkeys, domestic ducks, muscovy ducks and muscovy duck hybrids, and domestic geese. The recommendations on domestic ducks, muscovy ducks and muscovy duck hybrids were approved in June 1999 with only one amendment to the recommendation on muscovy ducks. This amendment stated that, by 31 December 2004, new housing systems must allow ducks to perform normal behaviour (standing in normal posture, turning around, flapping wings...) prohibiting individual cages. From 31st December 2010, these requirements will be applicable to all accommodations.

In 1997, a *Recommendation concerning Ratites* was also adopted, covering ostriches, emus and rheas. It provides for a revision of the recommendation five years after adoption, but this revision has not started yet.

With regard to feather plucking, Council of Europe's standing committee has taken recommendations in 1999 stating that feathers including down can not be plucked from live birds.

European Union

Council Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes covers all poultry, including ostriches and game species reared for slaughter, though not for shooting (rearing for sport is exempted). Under this directive, member states shall ensure that owners or keepers of farmed animals take steps to ensure the welfare of animals in their care and to avoid unnecessary pain, suffering or injury.

This is fully applicable to feather plucking, thus plucking of live birds is prohibited in the EU, only harvesting of feathers is allowed.

The *Report on Welfare Aspects of the Production of Foie Gras in Ducks and Geese*, prepared for the European Commission by the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare in 1998, concluded that force feeding as currently practised is detrimental to the welfare of the birds. It points out that alternative products made from the livers of non-force fed animals are on the market. However, under current French national rules, and the Community's poultry meat marketing rules, these cannot be sold as foie gras, as the definition "foie gras" can only be used for goose liver of minimum 400 g net and duck liver of minimum 300 g net. The Community rules are laid down in *Commission Regulation (EC) No 543/2008 of 16 June 2008 laying down detailed rules for the application of Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007 as regards the marketing standards for poultrymeat* (Article 1.3). Under this Regulation, when meat from geese and ducks used for foie gras production is labelled as coming from free range systems, the label also must specify "*from foie gras production*" (Article 11.1).

National legislation

In the EU force-feeding is illegal in Germany, Denmark, Finland, Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Slovenia and six Austrian provinces as well as in Italy. Poland banned force-feeding in its animal welfare law adopted in 1997 and existing farms had up to 1999 to stop force-feeding. Sweden, UK, and the Netherlands do not have a specific law on force-feeding, but they consider it would be contrary to their general animal welfare law. Sweden's legislation furthermore includes a provision on the way animals can be fed, which makes force-feeding illegal.

Action needed

- The Council of Europe recommendations on turkeys, domestic ducks, geese, and muscovy ducks should be implemented as soon as possible in the legislation of the member states and of the EU.
- Force feeding of birds should be phased out by those countries which practise it.
- Standards should be set up to make sure farmed game are able to perform their natural behaviour
- The Council of Europe recommendation on ratites should be revised, taking into account the latest available scientific knowledge
- Inspections must be done and enforcement measures must be taken to ensure that no birds are plucked alive.