

# The Mysterious Red-breasted Goose

*(Brenta ruficollis)*

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For many years while the Russian possessions were more or less closed to foreigners, very little was known about this very beautiful goose. Occasionally one or two pairs would be brought out but generally they were unknown to the avicultural world. The few that were in the hands of zoos and private breeders were not producing in captivity. The word got out that they would not produce in captivity for some unknown reason. Probably this bad reputation was the result of the sexes being identical (except the female is slightly smaller than the male). Some began to produce in captivity when vent sexing came about and true pairs were put together in happy environments.

Red-breasted geese belong to a group of geese that are called "Brants". Included in this tribe are the Canada, Brent, Barnacle, and the Hawaiian or Nene Goose. They are members of the same family because of their similarities, however they are quite different in many ways. The Red-breasted are by far the most colorful of the entire family. They are so striking that most every waterfowl enthusiast want to have a flock of them.

So what is the secret to get them to nest? Perhaps there is no secret, but there are several things the prospective breeder can do to help along his or her success. Probably, the most important thing about these birds is their need for privacy. They are not "flock" birds during the breeding season. In their native habitat they steal away and nest rather secretly. It was a long time before their nesting area in Siberia was discovered by ornithologists. They should be kept away from the normal traffic of the aviary. Strangers should not be allowed to be near them during the nesting season. For years it was thought that they had to be kept in flocks and allowed to pair up and go off alone as pairs to nest. This has been proven not to be true. Perhaps this notion came about because it was necessary in the early years of captivity to allow them to pair up naturally as they could not easily be paired up by visual methods. It is important to have enough space for the pairs to get away from other nesting geese (especially other Red-breasted) and have their nest in privacy.

Some breeders have reported that polygamy is often observed with ganders taking as many as three hens as mates. I think that it is agreed that the normal reproduction habits in the wild is to pair off separately.

With the good nourishment of our feeds today it is quite common to have domestic bred birds nest the second year although in the wild it is thought that some wait until the third or fourth year to nest. Many pairs wait until this time to nest even with the good feed of today. Many breeders feel that it is best have them wait until they are totally mature before getting them to nest. This is where patience on the part of the breeder is favored for the sake of getting healthy and strong goslings.

These geese will double or even triple clutch in a good year. Breeders have found it best to let the hen lay at least three eggs before taking the additional eggs away one day at a time as they are laid. Be sure to use artificial eggs that are near the size and look of the natural ones as some hens have not accepted strange eggs as their own.

Breeder geese should have plenty of greens. This not only helps them go to nest but in the wild they can live for months on just the greens found in the bottom of open streams and on the Tundra.

Most breeders have some system of putting the young goslings out on lawns so they can eat the grass at will. This movable coop idea works well with any type of waterfowl. Probably, a low protein diet should be fed as with all geese. A good general vitamin such as Vionate should be fed three or four times a week. Plenty of fresh water is needed for the goslings to drink.

By now there is a large population of hand-raised stock available. If you plan on raising these birds be sure to get domestic hand-raised breeders that are unrelated. It has been proven that wild-caught birds brought into captivity very seldom breed. Perhaps this was the problem in getting a domestic raised population going. When eggs were hatch from the nests in the wild these birds began to nest and breed successfully.

No matter what your favorite goose is, you will fall in love with these little fellows. I had a pair years ago and just loved them. Their call is different from the other geese and of course their coloration is just outstanding. They are at the top of my favorite goose list. I notice that they have leveled off in price which is good as for years and years they were out of the range to most of the waterfowl breeders. I can remember when they were \$2000 a pair which puts them way up on the unobtainable species list. Now they are much more reasonably priced which is good for the hobby. I think that the supply and demand has kept them in the top of the price range along with the other more rare species of geese. I shall have some more of these mysterious geese in the near future.