Guinea Fowl GUIDE
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We've been looking for an informative, readable book on guinea fowl for many, many years. At long last, someone has written that book. *Gardening with Guineas* is a brief but comprehensive and detailed handbook on these interesting and useful but under-appreciated birds by a writer who knows and loves them. It contains everything you'll need to know to raise guineas successfully. What's more, it might very well convince you that you need some guineas, even if you didn't know it.

Why would anyone “need” a bird that is perhaps best known for its raucous cry and its “wildness?” To eat ticks! For some people, that's reason enough.

But they also dine on potato bugs, moths, slugs, aphids, Japanese beetles, grasshoppers and other creepy-crawlers. And they'll do this in your garden, without scratching out seeds or seedlings or eating the plants. (The author notes that they will, however, eat tomatoes, if they once learn how.)

They kill snakes, and chase robins and other birds away from cherry trees and strawberry patches.

Noisy? Mostly when there’s a good reason—such as a hawk or other predator, or a human stranger. Wild? Not if you follow Jeannette Ferguson’s advice about handling them frequently from Day One on—and training them with treats of white millet!

She is first and foremost a gardener, who got her first guineas specifically to debug her flowers. But for homesteaders, the meat, which is quite unlike chicken, is another good reason for raising guineas.

Jeannette covers the breeds, classifications and terminology; hatching—in an incubator, under a guinea hen, or a chicken; feeding, at various ages; training; right on through recipes for the delicate, gamebird-like meat.

Just one small tip made this book worth reading for us. That was on sexing these birds. Hatcheries don’t even bother. They only sell straight-run (unsexed) keets (day-old guineas). For years, we had been told that the females have a call that sounds like “buck-wheat, buck-wheat,” while the males cry “chi-chi-chi-chi….” One problem is that the females also call “chi-chi-chi” when alarmed. And in a moving flock of birds that seemingly all look alike, often all screaming in unison, how can you even tell who said what?

Ferguson says that by 12-15 weeks of age, the cocks develop larger and thicker gills (which until reading this book we called wattles.) “The adult guinea cock will have gills so large they hang outward and down, appearing to cup under. By a year old, the guinea cock stands out with his larger gills, one-syllable sound, a slightly larger helmet, and slightly longer legs than those of the guinea hen. There is no way to mistake a male guinea from a female at this point.”

Just a bit skeptical, we went out to the guinea pen. Sure enough: once we knew what to look for, we noticed a definite difference! This was valuable information because we had been intending to butcher a couple, but it turned out to be even more profitable than we’d expected. Of our eight guineas, only three are hens, and killing the wrong one would have been a minor disaster in terms of increasing the flock.

Of even greater potential profit was the advice on training guineas to come into their house at night. In our first experience with guineas, about 45 years ago, the birds roosted in trees (or on the barn roof). The only way to harvest them for meat was with a .22 or shotgun. The hen-raised keets seldom survived, even the adults soon disappeared, and the flock died off. This was repeated several times in subsequent years. Eventually we gave up on guineas—until now, when we were just about to repeat the same old mistake.

Jeannette Ferguson says that by training the birds to go into the coop at night, losses from owls, other predators and bad weather can be minimized. By keeping them confined until about noon, or until after they lay their eggs, nests hidden in the weeds and eggs and keet losses can be eliminated.

The guineas will still pick up as much as 90% of their diet on bug control, which is yet another attraction to the self-sufficient homesteaders.

Reviewed by Jd Belanger, Editor Emeritus, reprinted from May/June, 2000 COUNTRYSIDE & SMALL STOCK JOURNAL.
Got ticks? Got obnoxious bugs and garden pests? Tired of insects destroying your flower beds and leaves and gardens? Just maybe guineas are for you. Years ago when I was unable to participate in the local garden club flower shows, I discovered guineas to be the solution to my problem. Just over a year after raising guineas, not only was I able to enter flower shows, but I won 102 ribbons and several rosettes that first season.

Guinea fowl range across the property taking bites of weed seeds, insects, grasshoppers, Japanese beetles and other obnoxious bugs with nearly every step they take. They prefer selecting pests that are on top of the ground or on plants and leaves within their eyesight and reach. Guineas can often be seen darting across the yard after a moth or other flying insect. Many people keep guineas because they eat ticks, alert them to strangers, or kill many types of snakes.

I also keep chickens but have been unable to free range them because of the damage they would do to the flowers and flower beds—mostly due to scratching for bugs and insects beneath the surface, or scratching to dust bathe and in the process, pulling up plants—roots and all. So the chickens are confined to their house with attached poultry yard while the guineas are permitted to free range by day and return to roost inside their safe house with the chickens by night.

**THE FARMER’S WATCHDOG**

Guinea fowl are very entertaining to watch as they patrol across the property. Typically, the birds forage for food as a group or in small groups within eyesight of each other. They emit a low-level warble sound, not unlike chickens that is only audible when listening close by, i.e., within a few feet. Occasionally the birds will be disturbed either by some abnormal activity or sound or when they get separated and need to locate each other. During these times the birds can emit a louder sound as an alarm signal. This alarm call is what gave them the title years ago, “the farmer’s watchdog.” Guineas can be seen following a lawnmower that stirs up bugs. They can be seen chasing each other like little roadrunners during mating season, and can be heard giving the Dickens to anything or anyone who is strange or unusual to them by sounding their “alarm call” that usually lasts for about 20 seconds at a time. Guineas can be trained to come to you when they are called. For the person who cares to put some effort in to taming a guinea as an animal to be held and petted, that too is possible.

If you want an unusual, spotted bird that can alert you to intruders, can make gardening more pleasant by eating bugs, insects and ticks, can entertain your family and visitors alike, and can supply you with beautiful feathers, eggs and/or meat, guinea fowl might be for you.
BEFORE PURCHASING, CONSIDER THIS…

But before rushing out to purchase hatching eggs or keets (baby guineas), there are a few things to consider…

Unlike chickens, guinea fowl can run faster, fly higher, range further, and “sing” louder than most poultry. Guinea fowl can be very difficult to catch unless they are trained. They can fly up onto the roof of a house or high up into a tree. Although they are not as loud as peafowl, they are more “talkative”, especially during that first year of life when everything they see and hear is new and unusual to them.

If guineas are not trained to roost inside a poultry shed at night, they will take to the trees and have all night slumber parties, talking into the wee hours—especially during a full moon.

A guinea hen, the female adult guinea, makes a two-syllable sound, “buck-wheat, buck-wheat.” She can also imitate the call of the male guinea cock’s one syllable sound, “chi-chi-chi.” However, a guinea cock cannot imitate a guinea hen. This is the easiest way to identify if a guinea is male or female. Adults can be vent sexed, but keets are sold only as straight run, unsexed. The sex of a guinea keet cannot be identified until it is around eight weeks old when it begins making either the one or two-syllable sounds.

Guinea fowl will dust bathe to clean their feathers, and they will normally select a place that is free from grass like a bald spot in the yard or freshly tilled soil. Covering the soil in flowerbeds with mulch can help to discourage them from selecting those areas. At my place, there is a special area in the back yard near their house that we keep tilled especially for dusting, and our flock seems to understand and enjoy this area that is softer and easier for them to make their little pits to dust bathe in.

While guineas can rid the vegetable gardens of unwanted pests, it is best not to allow them into that area until plants are established and well rooted in the spring. After a long winter without greens to munch on, guineas can get themselves into trouble by following the owner across the garden—pecking at the nice green onion sprouts as they are planted only to have the owner finish planting the row, turn around and see the onion sets scattered behind him. Later, guineas might peck at a few tomatoes or other veggies, but the benefits of keeping guineas far outweigh any damage they might do. In most cases, planting a few extra plants will make up for any losses.

Check into the rules and regulations where you live to see if you are permitted to keep poultry. If you have neighbors and you want to garden with guineas and allow them to free range by day, make certain your neighbors are knowledgeable about the benefits of having guinea fowl around, and ask if they will mind visitors. Guineas can fly over any fencing and will surely get curious about the grass that might be greener on the other side. There are things you can do to encourage your flock to stay on your own property, but the occasional visit to the neighbor’s side of the fence must be contemplated.

If “noise” is a concern, you might consider keeping only guinea cocks. Although they can be just as loud as guinea hens, they do not “sing” as often. And unlike keeping too many chicken roosters that sometimes fight to kill, other than an occasional darting or peck demonstrated by the pecking order, guinea cocks do not fight to kill each other.
Like all animals, guinea fowl need care. They need predator-proof housing, proper feed and fresh water.

Predator proof housing for guineas is extremely important. Housing provides a safe and secure place for guinea fowl to roost overnight. Guinea fowl cannot see well at night, and if left to roost in trees they will eventually become a midnight snack for hungry owls, raccoons or other overnight predators. Dry, draft-free housing will also keep them safe from frostbite during hazardous winter weather. Guineas will come to know their house as the place they can find food, water and safety. Proper housing should be considered and constructed before you get guinea eggs to hatch, guinea keets to brood, or older guinea fowl to raise.

Keets are raised on starter feed. Turkey starter with amprolium (a coccidiostat) has the high protein content needed for these fast-growing birds. Adults can be fed a chicken layer ration or a gamebird feed. Feed and fresh, clean water should be available 24/7 inside their poultry house—guinea fowl will not overeat.

Eggs, keets and older guinea fowl can be ordered from Guinea Farm, the world’s largest guinea fowl hatchery (www.guineafarm.com). 30 keets per order is the minimum order so the keets will stay warm during shipment. Keets are available in 22 different varieties.

Eggs and keets can also be purchased from local breeders within your state. A guinea fowl breeder’s list is located online at http://guineas.com/breeders/. The list is larger during breeding season, generally from March through September in most areas of the USA. You can also order eggs or keets from a National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP)-registered flock outside your home state, as indicated on the breeders list.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT GUINEAS…**

The Guinea Fowl Breeders Association is for anyone interested in guinea fowl. This is an Internet group that meets annually to learn more in-depth and up-to-date information about keeping and raising guinea fowl. Details at www.gfba.org.

Throughout the year, members hang out online at a Guinea Fowl Message Board and help others with questions, comments and answers about keeping guinea fowl at www.guineafowl.com/board.

Here you will also find links to hundreds of photographs of brooders, housing, guineas and even a guinea fowl color chart and sound files to help you identify the birds in your flock.
Poultry Preparation For Human Consumption

Using a standard Fiskars style fish fillet knife (handle with extreme caution of course!) the first step is to open the large jugular artery so as the bird will properly drain blood without severing the spine at this time. Once the guinea fowl is expired and properly drained you are now ready to remove the skin/feathers/pelt.

Remember that the skin and fat are not the healthiest part of poultry to consume. And plucking pin feathers is a chore best left for only the worst punishment of offenders. Thus we learned that peeling the pelt is the best and quickest way to get superior and timely results. So, using the same (well rinsed) fillet knife start at the top of the breast and with the blade edge facing outwards, run a lateral cut under the skin down under the belly towards the vent. With your hands start working the pelt downwards from neck over shoulders and wings (slicing skin and pulling as required) thence downward pulling skin downward off legs (and slicing as per wings). The lower portions of legs and last section of wings are easiest to separate from joints with the knife at this time. You may now easily remove the bird’s crop and larynx together with the neck bone and head. By now the full pelt is inverted and ready to be sliced off with tail bone. Carefully encircle the vent being careful not to puncture the small/large intestine you are now able to expose the internal organ cavity and the package will easily be removed with only slight coaxing. With the major organs removed the final removal of lung material and other embedded organs can easily be handled under cold fresh running water. Remember to not allow the meat to become warmed nor exposed to debris. Pack on ice and then prepare the meat for cooking beginning with a garlic rub and a light marinade of teriyaki.

Using standard poultry shears divide the properly de-skinned and marinated guinea fowl into two bilateral halves; each with a breast, a wing and a thigh/drum. In a standard square broiling casserole lay the two halves and lightly butter and season to taste. I use custom blended fresh herbs and ground pepper. Cook under light broil until golden brown. Five minutes before finishing I add a glazing sauce of fresh whole cranberries. Cook sauce until it starts to sizzle and brown the cranberries. Following a fresh garden salad of spring greens the cranberry glazed guinea fowl is served on a bed of long-grain wild rice with a steaming hot sprig of broccoli and a glass of your favorite Merlot. Voila! Grande Pintade!

GFBA is for anyone interested in learning accurate information about raising guinea fowl. We invite you to visit our website at www.gfba.org. Members are eager to share information learned by attending our conventions as well as knowledge gained through our personal experiences with guinea fowl and other poultry. We invite you to post your questions on our message board at www.guineafowl.com/board.

Jeannette Ferguson is President of the Guinea Fowl Breeders Association (GFBA) and author of the book Gardening with Guineas: A Step by Step Guide to Raising Guinea Fowl on a Small Scale.
Each year as tick season ramps up I get numerous requests for grown guinea fowl. Since a sizable number of pearl guineas roam freely on our property, people are surprised when I refuse to part with any, until I explain that for every person looking for grown guineas, I hear dozens of stories of newly acquired guineas that flew the coop. Typically, guinea fowl will stay on the home place where they were raised, but won’t stick around long if they’ve been transplanted.

Like a lot of other guinea owners, we keep these birds primarily to patrol for ticks and any other bugs they care to gobble up. Our guineas are free to roam anywhere they please on our rural property. Whenever we start up a mower, guineas come flocking to take advantage of the insects we scatter while mowing. When they’re not following the mower, they spend a lot of time gleaning bugs in the orchard or along the edge of the forest surrounding our pasture.

One place where guineas are not welcome is in our garden. Although they don’t scratch as much as chickens, they do far more damage with their dust holes. And they consider a great place for dusting to be anywhere they find loose soil. It’s no matter to them if the loose soil happens to be a freshly seeded vegetable garden. But, because our guineas have plenty of other places to forage, we have no trouble keeping them out of our garden.
We’ve had guineas for nearly 30 years. When we first got them, they wanted to roost in a tree or on the roof of the house or barn, and the hens hid their nests out in the wild. Guineas are fiercely protective parents, but unfortunately don’t seem to grasp the concept that little ones cannot move as fast as the big guys. After the first few batches of wilderness keets disappeared one by one, we realized we would have to gather up future hatchlings and raise them in protective custody until they got big enough to fend for themselves.

Initially we gathered newly hatched keets into a brooder cage, set up where the parent guineas had ready access — usually in a barn stall the adult guineas could easily get to. Because the brooder was a cage, the adults could see the keets and protectively guarded them — sometimes even trying to run us off when we went to feed and water the babies. The advantage to this arrangement was that when the keets were released from jail, the parents recognized and accepted them. When keets are raised apart from adults and then turned loose, the older guineas may consider them to be intruders and run them off.

But gathering up newly hatched keets is another matter entirely. When hatchlings begin following the mama hen, the other guineas in the flock—both hens and cocks — help protect the babies. When we went out to scoop up the babies with our butterfly net, we had the fun of at the same time warding off attack by a mob of indignant protectors with sharp beaks and claws. In all the commotion the keets would flatten themselves in the grass to hide, where they became virtually invisible.

To avoid this periodic rodeo, we decided the better part of valor is to hatch guinea eggs by some means other than under a guinea hen. When we have a broody chicken hen, we typically fill her nest with guinea eggs. Compared to guinea hens, chicken hens are much more careful mothers.
If we put the eggs in the incubator and add chicken eggs a week later they all hatch at the same time—guinea eggs take 28 days to hatch compared to 21 days for chicken eggs. We raise and feed the keets exactly the same way we raise and feed chicks. By raising them together, the keets become a little less wild; and when the group is moved from the brooder to the coop, the guineas will follow the chickens inside at night, instead of perching in trees where they can be picked off by night marauding owls.

During the day, of course, the guineas forsake the chicken run and roam throughout our place at will. Our earlier hens hid their eggs in tall grass or under some piece of machinery. Finding the eggs so we could incubate them was always a challenge. But guinea hens typically share a nest and won’t start setting until the nest accumulates two dozen eggs or more. As the pile of eggs accumulates, the nest becomes easier to spot.

Over the years our guinea hens have gradually become more inclined to nest inside the chicken coop, choosing the darkest corner in which to accumulate their eggs. This summer, for the first time, some of our guinea hens surprised us by laying eggs in the nests we provide for our chicken hens. But they are not nearly as accommodating as chickens about having eggs collected from beneath them while they’re on the nest. Whereas a chicken will let us reach under her to remove eggs, a guinea will explode out of the nest at our approach. This explosive behavior doesn’t much affect guinea eggs, with their incredibly tough shells, but any chicken eggs that are also in the nest may get cracked or broken.

Even though guinea fowl fly well, and will readily take off when startled, most of the time they prefer to walk. That’s fine as long as they aren’t scurrying down the road, often ahead of the mail carrier or UPS truck. They don’t seem to be particularly hasty about getting out of the way of traffic, though, so hurried drivers have to slow down to avoid hitting one. What exactly the birds find so attractive about our rural road I have yet to determine.
Another interesting thing about guineas is that much of their activity involves cooperative effort. For instance, once they have accumulated a pile of eggs in a nest, two or more hens will typically set together. And after the keets hatch, the whole flock cooperates to protect them from predators. Of course, as we have seen, the free roaming mamas and papas are far too active to successfully raise little ones.

Hunting is a much more successful cooperative effort. When the pasture grass is short, the guineas join forces to scare up insects. They’ll form a long line and move slowly through the grass, side-by-side. When they scare up a grasshopper or other insect, the closest guineas race each other to gobble it down.

Another successful group effort is their habit of mob attacking an enemy. One day a fox wandered down our lane, spied the guineas, and thought he’d grab a quick meal. Instead the guineas surrounded the fox, and when he lunged at one of the birds, two or three of those behind him mounted a rear attack. The fox whirled around and tried to grab one of the attackers, but the guineas now behind him rushed to peck his tail end. After several more attempts, the fox tucked his tail between his legs and slunk back into the forest.

As beneficial and entertaining as guineas can be, they’re not for everyone, especially where nearby neighbors are involved. Guinea fowl have some pretty aggravating habits: they are loud and noisy; they dig deep dust holes in inconvenient places; they enjoy exploring a shop or shed with the door left open and depositing their smelly calling cards on tool handles; and they love to fly up to the rooftop and endlessly chase each other back and forth across the roof. But we love our guineas and wouldn’t want to be without them.

Gail Damerow has been the leading expert on poultry since her first book on raising chickens was published in 1976. She is the author of the recently updated and revised classic Storey’s Guide to Raising Chickens, 3rd edition, along with these other books available from our bookstore at www.BackyardPoultryMag.com/bookstore: The Chicken Health Handbook, Your Chickens, Barnyard in Your Backyard, Fences for Pasture & Garden and The Backyard Homestead Guide to Raising Farm Animals.
Guinea Fowl that are trained to roost inside a shelter at night will outlive those that roost in trees. Guinea fowl have been reported to have lived to be 17 years or older, but unfortunately, more lose their lives to predators than to old age.

Guineas are unable to see in the dark and are easy pickings as a nighttime snack for predators on the prowl. Being high up in a tree is no safer than being broody on an outdoor nest. Hawks, owls and raccoons are common everywhere and once they find an easy meal, you can bet they will return nightly until their food source is gone.

If you live in an area where winter temperatures drop below freezing, guinea fowl can get frostbite and lose toes, or worse... Sure, some may manage to survive in the worst conditions and the most frigid of nights, but that does not mean that the birds were comfortable, that they were not stressed, and that they should be left outdoors to fend for themselves. Flock owners should be responsible and provide proper housing for their guinea fowl just as they do for their dogs, barn cats and other farm animals that require housing. Guineas are capable of being trained and should be trained to roost inside.
Housing for guinea fowl need not be elaborate. Housing can be anything from an old outhouse for a few guineas or a shed to a corner of the barn or garage or a converted trailer. What is important is that housing provides a place for guineas to roost in that is dry, draft free and predator proof. Ventilation, roosting bars, adequate space for the number of birds kept and the type bedding used as well as keeping unfrozen water and feed available 24/7 are important factors to keeping your flock healthy and safe while confined.

While a guinea house may seem huge for the beginner with tiny keets kept in a small brooder or holding pen inside the adult guinea house, they grow up really fast and as adults need three to four sq. ft. of space per bird. Keep in mind that guineas in colder areas of the U.S. and abroad may very well need to be confined to the inside of their shelter for weeks at a time during the coldest days of winter, especially during ice storms, deep snows and blizzards. To prevent stress and pecking from boredom and to provide comfort for the birds enclosed, four sq. ft. per bird is best. When calculating space per bird, do take into consideration any space provided by nesting boxes, roosting bars and shelving. A shelter such as a shed instead of a barn with a high roof will also hold in some body heat and the interior of the building will be much more comfortable than the frigid temperatures outdoors.

Frigid outside, warm and cozy inside. Photos by Phyllis Bender, Connecticut.
Roosting bars should be provided for guinea fowl. Guineas fluff their feathers to allow air in to help cool their bodies during the summer and to allow the warm air from their body heat to warm their legs and feet during the winter. If a guinea is forced to sleep on the cold ground or on litter, it cannot fluff up the feathers to cover the feet that can actually freeze in temperatures of 10° F or less. Guineas roosting in trees are also subjected to strong winds that can ruffle their feathers, allowing body heat to escape rather than to keep them warm and cozy. Small tree branches, 2x4s on edge or cut in half make good roosting bars. While it is not necessary to put up nesting boxes for guineas, when stuffed with loose straw to provide a wild-like hiding place, a guinea hen will often use or share a nesting box to lay eggs (during laying season) or to bed down overnight on a cold winter night.

Ventilation helps to allow moisture as well as fumes from ammonia and odors to escape through vents in the eaves or through exhaust fans installed in the roof or by windows that can be opened slightly—taking care that the air exchange does not create drafts in the roosting area. All openings should be covered securely with quarter inch welded wire fencing to keep rats, mice, mink, snakes and other small predators out. Double wood walls (without insulation) will help hold in some heat. Insulating an unheated building can actually hold moisture in. Dampness can cause respiratory problems and increase the risk of disease. Parasites can multiply rapidly in damp bedding. Remove any bedding that gets wet from water spills and keep the bedding as dry as possible. While straw tends to hold in moisture and takes much longer to dry out, a bag or two of compressed wood shavings for animal bedding is really nice to use and clean up is a breeze. Loose bedding is not as likely to grow mold and mildew. Droppings from guinea fowl are much drier than those from chickens and ventilation is not as great a problem when guineas are housed alone.

Electricity inside the shelter makes life easier on both the owner and the flock. Being able to provide a 5-watt nightlight to help guineas see at night and a brighter light so we can see at night or to see to clean the coop or for our flock when confined on darker, gloomy winter days is one thing, but to be able to provide a water base heater that will keep their water from freezing in the winter is a real blessing. For the owner, this means fewer trips hauling water, no time spent breaking ice, and a continuous supply of water for our flock. Drinking water is actually more important than food. Guineas can survive longer without food than they can without water. Even ice cold water actually helps to maintain the body temperature in our guinea fowl during winter. Please do not assume the birds can eat snow in place of drinking water. It takes a lot of snow eating to be equivalent to drinking water.
Although the common helmeted guinea fowl originate from Africa, they are pretty tough birds and do not require a heated coop. Some owners do prefer to give their birds the option of getting under a heat lamp when temperatures drop to the single digits. If you choose to do the same, make absolutely certain that the light is securely fastened high off the bedding material and that both the light bulb and your guineas are protected by a shield.

If the guinea house is large enough, it can be partitioned with a room for food storage and a brooder and with storage areas for bedding and hay or straw. The storage area can come in handy should the size of your flock increase and additional housing space be needed.

Yes, guinea fowl do like to get out for some exercise and fresh air even in the winter. On a snowy, but calm day when there are no weather warnings or hazardous conditions, let them out! Prepare to help first timers back into the henhouse at night. Some may freak out at their first snow, but as you can see in the pictures, they will get use to it, walk on it, and enjoy finding many seeds and such along fence rows and on the undersides of grasses that protrude through the snow. An attached poultry yard can be covered in the winter and an occasional flake from a bale of alfalfa hay will provide some greens and tiny insects to peck at while outdoors getting some fresh air and sunshine.

Jeannette Ferguson is author of the book *Gardening with Guineas*, President of the Guinea Fowl Breeders Association (GFBA), and moderates the Guinea Fowl Message Board at www.guineafowl.com/board. For details about training and raising guinea fowl from egg through adult, you can get your own copy of the book *Gardening with Guineas: A Step by Step Guide to Raising Guinea Fowl on a Small Scale* from the Backyard Poultry Bookstore on page 16. For details about the Guinea Fowl Breeders Association, please visit the GFBA website at www.gfba.org.
Mirror, Mirror On The Wall
Who’s The BEST MOM Of All?

A guinea hen reflecting in the mirror. Photo © Phyllis Bender.

BY JEANNETTE FERGUSON
GUINEA FOWL BREEDERS ASSOCIATION (GFBA)

Do guinea hens really make bad moms? Is there really a concern? What exactly is the problem with guinea moms, and why do people say things against these very entertaining birds that are such a benefit to have around the farm, by making negative statements about guineas or asking questions such as, “Is it true that guinea hens make bad moms?” An experienced guinea keeper will understand that there is no simple yes or no answer to this question.

Weather or Not?

It is not as dry here in the USA as was their original home in Africa, and guinea fowl are not quite as calm or as easy to relocate from a nest as most chicken hens are. Guineas do not usually lay their eggs inside the safety of a coop in nesting boxes. When given the chance, they lay their eggs outdoors in hidden areas that are most difficult to find. Regardless of the location of a nest, predators and exposure are a big concern. These facts are only a few of the things that must be taken into consideration to determine whether or not a guinea hen will be given the opportunity to be a good mom.

Instinct will tell a guinea hen to lay her eggs in a secluded, hidden location. It is the nature of guinea hens to share nests, so the clutch will build rapidly. Once the nest accumulates 25-30 eggs, one or more guinea hens “might” decide to go broody on the same nest. A good broody hen will stay put day and night for the duration (26-28 days) other than to leave the nest for food and water—usually no more than twice daily, and usually not for longer than 20 minutes at a time.

These guinea hens share an outdoor nest. Photo © John Ellisor.
A guinea hen just might occasionally survive all odds, the weather may be perfectly dry, and she and her mate might bring home a few dozen healthy keets—beware, other birds in the flock may or may not be far too curious about the returning keets and may accidently, or intentionally, injure them.

After assuming that a missing guinea hen is history, she may show up a month later with a few keets in tow. It is safe to assume that she hatched out a few dozen or more—what you see are the survivors.

A guinea hen might make her nest inside the safety of a henhouse where eggs will remain unharmed, hatched keets will not get wet and all are safe from predators—only to have the rest of the flock put those keets through a brutal pecking order ritual which is far too harsh for them to survive.

Keets that do survive but are in a coop with other adult birds are more than likely exposed to coccidia, worms, contaminated bedding, and may drown in adult waterers even if they are not bothered by other adult birds in the flock.

Unexpected deaths can happen. A guinea mom may accidently step on and/or crush a keet, a few may get away from the nest and chill, or the mom may leave them unattended too long.

Some guinea moms tire before the hatch is complete and do not remain broody. Other guinea moms might stay put through day 26 and move her keets to a new location—leaving the nest before the remaining eggs hatch.

Some guinea moms completely finish a hatch and later tire of the motherhood role—leaving her keets behind to chill and die.

Do any of the statements above make a guinea hen “a bad mom?” Or is it that odds are against a mom being able to do a good job under some of those circumstances? Actually, most guinea hens are great moms who protect their clutch of eggs or keets as best as possible, staying put during a predator attack, hissing and darting at predators that are often far too big and strong for her, attempting to protect the contents of her nest as best as she can. Unfortunately, more often than not, a guinea mom who is broody outdoors will lose her life to a predator.

To watch a guinea mom communicate with her keets is awesome—to see her call them to bits of food and teach them to eat, to watch her carefully lower herself onto the nest as they scramble under her for warmth and protection, to watch as the keets play and climb all over her, to listen to the sweet little peeps and chirping sounds they make. But getting there is tough, avoiding the elements is rough, and relocating the little family to a holding pen that is safe for mom to continue to raise her own is not always easy and can be dangerous for the owner because that mom will be very protective of her newborns.
**Helping Mom**

A guinea hen can do a much better job if we can encourage her to make her nest in a safe place. If guineas are confined to the coop until after they lay their daily egg, they will begin a nest indoors. Creating a cozy, private location helps. This can be something as simple as a dog kennel with the opening facing a wall, straw stuffed behind a sheet of plywood leaning and secured to a wall, a wooden teepee to hide under, or nesting boxes to get in or under.

By using a dog kennel inside the coop—the gate can be closed when the hatch begins to confine the keets, to keep mom from taking them outside, and to protect them from a harsh pecking order. As the keets grow and the family needs more room, they can be easily transported to a roomier holding pen where they can remain part of the flock, without injury to the keets.

Once a nest is underway inside the coop, the guinea hens using that nest are more likely to return to lay their daily egg until one or more goes broody, or a chicken hen sharing the same quarters may go broody on guinea eggs and complete the job for her, taking keets to raise as her own.

If a guinea hen does go broody outdoors, relocating her and the egg to a safe place is a possibility (I have done so successfully) but this is a difficult task and not all guineas will continue to remain broody once the nest is disturbed. Another way to help this mom would be to put a small weave protective fence around the area in an attempt to provide some protection from overnight predators. After the hatch takes place, mom and keets can be moved to a holding pen where she can safely raise her own.

You will want to keep a close eye on the new family to watch that the chick waterer is not accidentally knocked over by Mom, and to be certain that Mom is indeed caring for them full time and not losing interest.

**Whether or Not?**

You can be the mom, gather eggs daily, store them properly, use an incubator inside the safety of your house, know the expected hatch date, use a clean brooder (a cardboard box inside your house will do), handle and maybe even tame a few keets, then reunite them with the flock by moving them to a clean holding pen after they reach six weeks of age and are fully feathered.

**So Who Is the Best Mom?**

I have kept various breeds of poultry over the past 30 years, and guinea fowl are no doubt the most challenging—unless they are trained that is. I have lost many hens through trial and error—mostly to predators when a guinea hen has gone broody on a hidden nest that I could not find. A few have hatched keets, but very few keets survived without intervention. I have found 3-day-old keets spread about a 3’ area in the field—killed by an owl in broad daylight, nests destroyed by skunks, stray dogs and worse. And yes, over the years a few missing moms have returned home with some healthy keets in tow. While it is natural and beautiful and exciting to watch a guinea mom raising her own, I opt for the safety of my hen and her keets, so my preference is to use an incubator. I guess that makes me the best guinea mom.

For dozens of color photographs of guineas on both outdoor and indoor nests, a video of keets hatching in an incubator, pictures of various types of brooders, holding pens and guinea housing, visit www.guineafowl.com/fritsfarm.