

# GUINEA FOWL - TIPS, AND IDEAS



Tips and ideas to  
commonly asked  
questions-based  
on reading and  
personal  
experience

## Should I get Guineas? Considerations on understanding guineas.

Personally, I love these zany birds, but understand that they are NOT chickens! The power of guinea fowl is their ability to be independent and knock the stuffing out of insects. BUT, they are loud and can be messy. So, the first thing is deciding how you are going to handle these birds IF you decide to get them.

Will you be housing them, free range or providing a shelter for roosting? All this makes a difference. Guineas, according to many predators, are quite tasty. In order to make housing and protection work for your birds, you must understand the “brain” of a guinea.

They are flock creatures

They are naturally skittish game birds- part of their method to protect themselves.

They can and will roost in trees

They cannot see well in the dark and get freaked out if upset in the dark – If they get upset after dark, many times they leave the roost.

They require a higher protein diet than chickens (in the wild or free range, this is obtained by insect consumption)

They range quite a distance from home

They nest on the ground

They can be loud

They are a favorite diet of predators

So, you have now decided to get guineas- your neighbors will not mind the noise, you can deal with losing some to predators and bird poop does not bother you.

## How do I handle keets? (housing/bedding/feed etc)

Generally, you will buy keets from a farm store or breeder. You can get day olds shipped from a breeder. PLEASE only buy from NPIP certified breeders to reduce the chance of disease. This is one reason I do not recommend birds from auctions.

Keets require heat – 90 degrees to start and reduce by 5 degrees a week until they are ready to go outside. It is easy to set up a brooder box or tub with a light- even a regular 60 watt bulb works. The size of the brooder box depends on the number of babies you are getting. BEFORE you put babies in the brooder, put a thermometer under the light to check the temperature. Raise or lower the light to get that 90 degree warm spot. Always check because you do not want frozen or cooked keets! You can then move the light farther away each week, checking with the thermometer, to maintain the correct temperature. If your brooder is big enough, the babies

will move themselves to their comfort zone- under or further away. In this case, you will not have to move the light. Watch for the donut- a ring of birds with a hole in it under the light showing that the light is too warm, or if they huddle in a lump under the light it is not warm enough.

**BEDDING** – For the first couple of weeks, I use rubberized shelf liner. This gives the keets a grip and helps maintain strong legs. Spraddle legs can occur when they slip- such as when newspaper or slippery paper of any sort is used. I switch out the liner as needed, replacing with a clean one after sweeping up spilled food. I soak the liner in water and detergent and then use a hard hose spray to clean, then spray with a weak bleach solution and air drying, ready to use at the next change. Some people use old towels, which works but I find hard to clean. **DO NOT** use shavings of any kind at this stage as the keets will eat it and cause gastrointestinal issues.

**FEED and WATER** – All sorts of configurations out there. Start with clean containers that have been treated with a mild bleach solution and air dried before using. I will sprinkle some food on a piece of paper towel to get new keets to pick. Within a day, they find the feeder. Be certain to feed a **MEDICATED** high protein game bird feed or turkey starter. I recommend some electrolyte and vitamin supplements in the water for the first week to help get the babies started off right. Keep the water fresh- even if that means just dumping out some of it daily to get rid of the feed accumulation. For new babies, put marbles or similar sized stones in the bottom of the waterer so they do not fall in and drown. You can change your birds to pelleted turkey grower around 6 weeks of age. I **CONTINUE WITH MEDICATED**. Take a week or so of blending the feeds to help them adjust. Keep an eye on your feeders, particularly if the feed gets wet. This causes a fermenting, gooey, smelly mess that needs to be cleaned out or feed will not flow and if forced to eat due to hunger, can make your birds ill. If you have to feed outside, there are feeders available with a “hat” that diverts some of the water, but it will only minimize the wet feed, not eliminate the problem.

**TREATS**- From the beginning, start training your babies, if you wish to have them comfortable around you or go to the point where they come to your call and get petted! I use white millet and dried mealworms. Always use a common call or sound- even a dog whistle works, and then put the treat in the brooder. Eventually, you can move your hand in slowly and with much work, they will eat out of your hand. Make your movements quiet and deliberate. Training your birds at a young age helps call them in when they roam when they are older. If you have to close them in due a storm or for any reason, you will find this a huge benefit and well worth the time training. Please note- treats should not substitute for food. It is sort of like ice cream!

**GREENS** – Starting within the first week, I put greens in with my keets. I have found that introduction at an early age to a variety of items will encourage birds to eat different things all through life. Clover is heavily favored. I just pick clover leaves- ripping and cutting stems and leaves so they are not too long. The little ones will quickly learn to love this. Try all sorts of items- melon, apple, black oil sunflower seeds.

After about two weeks, I change my keets to a larger tub and put them on **UNTREATED PINE (NOT cedar)** shavings. Keep checking that warm spot temperature! Just keep feeding them turkey grower or game bird starter free choice and add in some chick grit to keep their digestion on track. They are growing at a very fast rate and need a lot of feed. Keep up the greens and other fruits. If it is winter, try some dried alfalfa or clover hay. Give them a tray of soil to scratch around in on occasion to get them exposed to your local microbes.



Keets will start looking for ways “up” at a surprising early age. You will find them sitting on the top of a feeder or water at just a few weeks of age. If your brooder has no top, find a screen or something that allows ventilation to go on the top no later than three weeks of age. Otherwise, you will have a surprise of missing keets when you go to check on them at sometime. You will also find that the area is getting very dusty. This is normal. The keets are getting feathers and this growth and preening releases a lot of dust from the feather growth. Just be sure you dust the area on occasion (or vacuum) and provide adequate ventilation. You may also see curled feathers. This is not due to a problem, but seems to be a stage keets go through at about 4 weeks or so. It is a normal part of feather growth.

#### Are there problems with keets?

For keets, it seems some common issues are spraddle legs and bent toes. The good footing on rubber matting seems to minimize this problem. You can straighten legs and toes out with various configurations of tape or band aids. Look on the web- lots of tips and videos. Slipped tendons occur also. This is where the hip tendon goes out of place and the leg actually begins to turn backwards. Unfortunately I have never found a way to correct this and have had to cull every bird affected. The best thing is the non-slippery foothold as they are developing, but sometimes it just happens despite the best of efforts!

If you find your keets wearing poop boots, the brooder needs to be cleaned more frequently. Remove the boots by soaking the foot with a warm water soaked paper towel to help soften the boot. Just handle babies quietly and gently as they can die of a heart attack just being handled.

Sometimes keets die – they just fail to thrive and there is nothing you can do.

#### When can I put keets in a coop? AND tips on coops

Well, this depends..Is there a heat source in the coop? What is the outdoor temperature? Is the coop dry? What size is the wire on the coop? For certain, you wait until they are fully feathered. Then, it depends on the other three items. If you have a heat source or if it is really warm weather, they can go in the coop earlier. A coop should always be dry or have an area that the babies can get to stay dry.

Be certain your coop or pen is keet safe. Keets can easily slip through standard dog fencing when frightened, and snakes can easily slip in! If you are putting birds in a wire pen or they have access to a wire run, check the sizes of the openings- even around the door and connections of panels. I always put a finer mesh (like rat wire) around the bottom for my smaller birds or chicken wire for adults. I even put a panel of wire on the door edges and at the panel connections, if they are too wide for the bird size. If upset, guineas try to hide also they go to a corner and put their head as far away from the inside of the coop as possible. Unfortunately, this can present a lovely guinea head to a predator on the OUTSIDE, such as foxes that hunt in pairs. You may find a headless guinea in your run the next day or worse, one with a severe injury. If the birds are small enough, they can actually go through the openings and disappear, generally in the bellies of the predator that upset them. To combat this, I use bird mesh secured with cable ties on my grower pens so the younger birds cannot pop through.

Weather coop or brooder, keep training your birds with treats and your specific call or sound and keep giving those supplements- they are great additional nutrition. Just keep up the high protein feed and fresh water and they will continue to grow. The addition of scratch feed for variety is a good idea, and remember to supplement with calcium and grit particularly if you are not allowing free range or the weather is bad for extended periods. You can also give babies a tray of local soil- this can help with exposure to local organisms and they love to scratch and peck.

### What about coop design?

This leads to coop design- another heavily discussed topic. Knowing the facts listed in the beginning and throwing in there what you want and your space availability, you can come up with a workable solution. I am going to put some ideas from what I have seen work and readers can use that as guidelines as desired.

- 1) No coop – Some people prefer their guineas to go au natural – and they will roost in trees. I can almost guarantee you will be looking for more guineas next year or give up on them eventually as they will disappear. Owls, hawks, eagles, coyotes, foxes, dogs, all will prey on your guineas.
- 2) Free range with protection – Many people like this idea – guineas get to go out and do guinea things as they desire but come home at night. Part of my flock are free range birds. We use part of our barn as the guineas like the high roosts. They are fed and watered there and are completely protected at night. These are the highlights that can be used in any building- one you are going to use as a coop or one you are designing –
  - High perches – mine are 5 to 15 feet above the ground. Be certain they are not located over something you wish to keep clean- feeders, water, lawnmowers....
  - Protection that is away from rain/snow/wind. Guineaes do not need anything fancy. They do not like to be cold and wet and they tiptoe through snow but they do not need an insulated or heated coop. Cold and wet birds leads to health issues. Providing an area that is protected, out of the wind and dry will be great unless it gets bitter for an extended period. You can put an area heater in- there are lots of panel type heaters that seem to be safer than a heat lamp that can be broken. Just watch for toes that freeze.
  - A high, wide area that allows birds to exit and enter off the ground. This can have a landing board, closable or not. For us, it is the roof of my breeder pens- they fly up and walk into the barn, then fly up into the rafters. This is 6 feet off the ground so difficult, although not impossible, for predators to access (keep ladders off this area and any kind of stepping blocks away as foxes and raccoons can figure this out)
  - A lower door that gets secured at night. Easiest is a battery or DC poultry door that will close and open according to time or light. This second door allows birds in that might be intimidated by a more aggressive bird at the other location. Also, birds that have been recently turned out tend to use the lower door more frequently than the upper roost. ( I use a great self closing door by Pullet-shut)
  - Electricity (if possible) – A red light that is on a timer allows birds to see anything that is disturbing them at night, reducing night terrors. Guineaes will fly off the roost when

disturbed at night. If the balance of your coop is not secured, a predator is probably below just waiting for dinner on the wing. I also use the electricity to keep the metal waterers from freezing in the winter.

- Predator protection- I have found that keeping a radio playing has helped keep the critters away- not totally but it seems they do not like the sound of a human voice speaking so mine get a talk station to listen to! Does not bother the birds at all. You can try all the bells and whistles- as I have- bird tape to keep away hawks, night guard flashing lights, motion detector lights...just move them around every week or so.
- You do not need nest boxes for guineas. Breeding is discussed in another area.

Using these basics, you can put together something that is the right size for the number of birds you are housing, allows you to clean it easily and gives you space for cleaning and watering your birds. If you are using a feeder you can hang, adjusting the height of the feeder so the feed ring is about the height of the back of the bird minimizes waste feed due to the natural inclination to scratch. Depending on the age of your birds, you may have to adjust on occasion. Water containers should NEVER be placed under a perch. All you will have is a poopy sludge. Make certain you check the waterer every day to clear out bedding or feces that may accumulate in the drinking trough. If you are going to put a defroster under the water container in the winter, invest in metal containers. Plastic ones are great but will grow algae due to the translucent sides.

Be certain to scrub your feed and waterers with an antibacterial detergent and disinfect with a weak bleach solution.

Many times even free range birds exit a coop into a penned area. Again, keep in mind the size of the openings in all areas (door frames, etc), When starting guineas in this configuration, you may want to have netting over the top to keep them in the run. Once ready to allow them to free range, landing boards at the top edge are helpful in getting them over the fence, and you can have a door that you open too. If you go with this option, once you start letting them go out of the penned area, you have to check birds to be certain they are getting back in at dusk. This may mean opening the door and herding them in at dark for a few days, then continuing to check each evening until everyone "gets it".

- 3) Keeping birds in - Coop design is about the same for this option and you may just have the birds exit into a specific area, such as your garden. If you do not want them going over the fence, you can consider cutting flight feathers. Taking this option means trimming those feathers as they grow back. I know that you can buy keets with the end of the wing cut off (pinioning) and they will never fly.

The main thing about your coop is to keep it secure from predators. Once a predator is successful, they will keep returning. Good planning will help minimize losses. TIP- If predators become an ongoing problem, sometimes locking up all free range birds for a time will help break the cycle.

## How do I train my guineas?

If you have your keets in a coop you can start working with them learning the in and out process at an early age- 4 weeks or so. Open the door and encourage them to come out- do not be surprised if there is a lot of reluctance as guineas do NOT like new things! Treats outside the door may help but if you need to get them into the yard or on the grass you can have someone quietly encourage them from inside. Once on the grass, it will not take them long to start picking about. You cannot just leave them. Keep an eye on them and two long sticks nearby. Guineaes will see sticks as very long extensions of your body.

Guineas work best when herded, not chased. Chasing will only get you frustrated and exhausted with the guineas very suspect of your motives. Staying at a distance that does not fluster the birds (maybe 6-8 feet) and using your magically extended arms at a walk, you can usually get them to go where you want. A little experimentation on your part will show you're the tolerance of your flock. If you have raised them they will allow you closer as they do get used to your presence and voice.

With the new babies, let them stay out for about 15 minutes, then herd them in to a welcoming treat. Don't forget that call or whistle to come home! Continue to allow them out every day with longer and longer times, if possible. Many people do this just before dusk to get the little ones used to coming in around dark.

Assistance with getting them where you want to go...

There is nothing more frustrating than herding a group of birds, positioning them beautifully, and they evade the very doorway needed to access the coop or pen. You can always enlist the help of more bodies, but many times this just upsets birds and they fly around the very coop where you wanted to send them. Fortunately, there is a fairly easy method to get them where you want them. I have found that guineas are sort of like a school of fish, they like to be in a group with a common direction. They also do not need a lot of opposition to move them in that direction! In order to get my birds to head into a doorway of a pen or coop, I put up a 3' fencing just held with temporary fence poles, in the design of a fishing weir – wide at the area where they enter and narrowing to the doorway. I round the birds up as calmly as possible and ensure they get into the runway, then encourage them along into the pen. Arranging this so they have to walk along a wall or such structure keeps them going in the right direction. If they start looking up and around, I can almost guarantee they will access an exit through flight and you will do it all over again. Generally, you get one in, the rest will follow if not harassed too much, just gently coerced. The birds generally do not push hard against the temporary fencing and when done, you can roll it up and put it out of the way.

## Is there a good way to introduce new birds to my flock?

There are other situations where guineas are ready to be turned out.

- You may be raising them in other pens and where they ultimately live is not where they have been housed.
- You may be purchasing guineas that are older
- You may be adding to your flock with new birds (melding flocks addressed later)

First and foremost, guineas MUST “home” for a while before being allowed out. This means keeping them closed up so they get used to the area and routine. If you do not do this your guineas will probably leave in fairly short order, or be confused and not be able to keep safe. There is also the potential of being chased by birds in an existing flock and your new birds running off into the sunset, never to be seen again!

I suggest a minimum of three weeks- maximum of six. If you do not have an existing flock, you do not need to worry about merging birds. I let new birds out and herd them back, being certain they go in through my poultry door a few times. This gets them comfortable with the set up. I continue this for a few days until eventually they are coming and going on their own without herding needed. As I noted about letting birds out of a yard, you have to check birds for a few evenings to be certain they are getting back into their coop. With an automatic poultry door, there have been occasions one or two have been caught outside after the door closed for the night and assistance was needed to get them safely back in the coop area. It only takes a few times for them to catch on and get settled in a more timely manner.

Now your birds should maintain themselves- going in and out, getting food and water in the area in the coop or pen and hopefully staying away from predators, but losses WILL happen. You need to know and understand this, particularly if you free range birds. They can free range for quite a distance so you may not see them around for part of the day, particularly when the weather is good and the grass is waiting to be culled of crickets, ticks and other delicious critters.

A bit about merging birds – Even if raising your own flocks and they are all related, guineas only see new birds as newcomers that threaten a current pecking order. The thing they DO remember are others that they have been raised with! Turning out birds at different times yet from the same keet group, the turned out birds find those still in a grower pen and go to visit! Also, they tend to fairly much stay in their keet groups as they are turned out, generally resulting in a number of “sub-flocks” within a large flock. This can change due to breeding or loss of numbers but it takes an adjustment period.

When merging groups it is important to keep in mind that these are birds and a pecking order reigns supreme. The best thing is to make the most important bird the newcomer on the block. I call this reverse merging. For example - If you have a new group you wish to turn out and there are two dominant males in your current group, Add the dominant males, one at a time, to the pen of new birds, a few days or so separating each new entry. This means the current dominant male is put at a disadvantage as he is now the new kid. Does this eliminate fighting – no. Does it reduce fighting when the new batch (with the incorporated dominant males) is turned out into the general population – yes- it helps. Depending on the groups you are merging, this can take a bit of time but it does reduce overall stress. However, all bets are off in breeding season.

Keep new birds isolated for a few weeks in case of illness. Buy from NPIP breeders. For penned birds that show excessive aggression, peepers installed for a time work VERY well!



## How do I catch and handle adults?

As was stated before, running after a guinea while in the open will generally just help you with your aerobic fitness and not result in a captured guinea. This is their major defense- eluding capture, and you are not going to defeat this easily. If you need to catch them, herd them into a pen or a building you can close first, if possible. Keep in mind my fish weir idea! Birds of all kinds are prone to stress heart failure, so try to keep the bedlam to a minimum. If a bird is panting, try to let it rest a while before attempting to catch again.

Invest in a long handled net- wire or net head. Net heads are softer on the bird but claws and beaks tend to get tangled. Once you get the bird cornered and get the net over them, get the net flat to the ground. Guineaes, unlike chickens, will keep trying to find a way out and can get under the support of the net head, leaving you where you started- with an empty net and a loose bird! When handling, be very aware of legs and wings. Legs in particular can get injured in the process, so hold both legs so the bird does not twist and injure a leg when you are removing them from the net. Holding the birds legs above the knee, I have found that getting the bird facing in a downward position produces a calm effect- sort of like grabbing a kitten by a scruff. You may not agree with this and feel it hurts their legs, but I have found the birds calm right down and do not try to escape- but I do need to be sure not to lose a grip on even one of the legs

If you need to treat a bird or handle for a longer period, tuck it horizontally in your arm and cover the head to keep them as calm as possible. Keeping legs and wings restrained is essential, so depending on what you need to do, it might take more than one person and wrapping the bird in a towel might be a good option.

## Male or Female?

There is only one foolproof way to tell a male from a female guinea, and a few tips to leads you in the right direction

Waddles- GENERALLY males have deeply cupped large waddles

Helmet – GENERALLY males have a larger “horn” on their head that gets larger the older they grow

Posture- GENERALLY males carry themselves and stand more upright while hens are more horizontal and football shaped, particularly during breeding season. -which is April – October on the east Coast.

These are VERY general – I have exceptions in my flock!

All birds chase one another, so do not think just because one seems assertive that it is a rooster.

The only sure way to determine gender s to listen to the call. Starting at about 6 weeks, the hens will begin to call. All have the alarm bell sound when upset- sort of sounding like a machine gun, but hens usually have a lot to say and have a two toned “buckwheat” call. Once you hear it, it is unmistakable. Young birds may only call once in a while but by the time they are sub-adults, the girls will be incessant.

## What about diseases and parasites – health and decontamination ?

Guineas are pretty hardy. That being said, there are times they become ill and die and there is no way to tell what the problem was – they just died. It is unfortunate. There are things you can do to keep a healthy flock.

- Buy birds from an NPIP certified breeder. Ask for a copy of the certificate. These birds have been tested for disease and are certified free of many communicable poultry diseases.
- Keep pens dry and clean – this keeps a lot of parasites in check. Also, use lime on pen floor to help keep dry and minimize treat feeding in areas where there is manure.
- Consider medicated feed – some people do not want to do this, but I use standard medicated feed.
- Clean waterers and feeders with a good detergent (many can be recommended by vet) and disinfect with weak bleach solution on a regular basis.
- Disinfect your coop from time to time – clear out all the old stuff, bedding, spider webs and dust, scrub down perches and potentially washable surfaces with a disinfectant – I use a pressure sprayer to then spray with a weak bleach solution and LET DRY- so be sure this is done during a warm, dry period.

Keep any eye on the poop – If you need to, worm your birds or take a fecal sample to your vet to see if there a specific problem and treatment required.

- Worm them on a schedule. I have seen people list they do it once a year with a poultry wormer. Some use DE but I have seen a variety of articles against this. If you need to, get a sample of poop to the vet for the specific worm and type of treatment. This is particularly a concern in groups that do not free range.
- Watch for Mites – Birds will itch or have scaly legs. If you suspect your birds have mites, you probably want to treat the birds individually. Some people put DE on their birds, but there is that controversy you may wish to investigate further. I have put diatomaceous earth in the dust pits and let the birds treat themselves once in a while. There are sites that can tell you how to use OTC ivermectin to control mites too.

Don't forget they will molt in the fall so be ready for feathers!

If you have questions- there are many forums on line with great people that wish to share experience, tips and ideas. If you want to ask me a question, please feel free to send me an email!

Thanks for reading and enjoy these wonderful birds!

Jean Leverage

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