Care and Handling of Game Birds
from Field to Table

Shoot for the Sky
Game birds offer a challenge to hunters and the reward of a delicious meal at the table if they are handled properly at each step. Game birds have various distinctive flavors and are excellent sources of protein, similar in these respects to domestic birds. The fat and calorie contents vary according to the age and species of the birds. A 3½-ounce portion (before cooking) of game bird meat has about 150 calories and provides half the average daily adult protein requirement.

Wild game birds may become contaminated with bacteria or gastric juices if they are improperly handled. Off flavors and odors may develop in the meat, and your risk of foodborne illness may increase. For optimum eating quality, remember the following handling tips during hunting, storage, and food preparation.

New Considerations with Wild Game Birds
Some hunters are questioning the safety of wild game because of the possible presence of West Nile virus (WNV). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is little evidence of the public getting WNV from handling or consuming infected birds. However, consider using the following common sense precautions:

- Wear latex/rubber gloves when field dressing and cleaning birds.
- Do NOT harvest and eat sick or abnormal acting birds.
- Fully cook game birds to an internal temperature of at least 165° F.

Hunters exposed to mosquitoes should apply insect repellents according to label instructions to clothing and skin.

Care in the Field and in Transport
Be prepared for the hunt. Remember to bring a sharp hunting knife, a whetstone or steel, light rope or nylon cord, plastic bags, clean cloths or paper towels, and a cooler filled with ice. Abide by game regulations for hunting, transporting, and storage of wild game.

Field dress the bird promptly. Remove the entrails and crop as soon as possible because the grain in the crop may ferment if not removed. The heart and liver may be saved for giblets. Store in a plastic bag on ice to keep them clean and cold.

Leave an identification mark on the bird. The birds may be plucked or skinned in the field. If you pluck the birds, bring a plastic bag for storing the feathers.

Nutritive Value — Fowl (flesh only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Portion</th>
<th>Calories</th>
<th>Protein (g.)</th>
<th>Total Fat (g.)</th>
<th>Saturated Fat (g.)</th>
<th>Cholesterol (mg.)</th>
<th>Iron (mg.)</th>
<th>Sodium (mg.)</th>
<th>Zinc (mg.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Roasted</td>
<td>3½ oz.</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wild</td>
<td>Raw†</td>
<td>Breast, 3½ oz.</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goose, Domestic</td>
<td>Roasted</td>
<td>3½ oz.</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pheasant</td>
<td>Raw†</td>
<td>Breast, 3½ oz.</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raw†</td>
<td>Leg, 3½ oz.</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Values for cooked not available.
Source: USDA Composition of Foods
Care in Preparation

Thaw the birds in the refrigerator or microwave. Food thawed in the microwave should be cooked immediately. Other thawed meat should be used within one to two days. Keep raw food and cooked food separate.

The age of the bird determines the cooking method. Wild game always should be cooked thoroughly to an internal temperature of 165° F. At this temperature the juices run clear and no pinkness remains in the meat. Young birds have lighter legs, soft breastbones, and flexible beaks. Old birds have darker, hard skinned legs, brittle breastbones, and inflexible beaks.

Game birds may be prepared like chicken. Dry cookery methods, such as frying, are appropriate for young birds. Moist cookery methods, such as stewing or braising, are appropriate for older birds. To decrease the distinctive taste of some wild game, trim off as much of the fat as possible. Older or skinned birds may become dry during baking. You may want to wrap the birds with bacon to prevent them from drying out.

Remove stuffing from the bird before storing, because stuffing is a good growth medium for microorganisms. Use leftovers within one or two days, or freeze for later use.

As stated earlier, do not store stuffing in the bird. Freezing alone will not preserve the stuffing to ensure its freshness.

Freezing

Beef, chicken, and pork can be frozen and remain good for up to six months. Freezing beef at 0° F or lower is recommended. For immediate use, birds should be stored in the refrigerator for up to two days. Other thawed meat should be used within one to two days. Keep raw food and cooked food separate.

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Revised by Karen Blakeslee, M.S., Extension Associate, Food Science

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