



Raising Ducks

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Portable grazing pen for ducks



Livin' large. Think of it as a duck playpen. (They do.) More photos and construction notes are available below.

I designed this grazing pen with several things in mind. It had to keep the ducks safe and content, it had to be portable, and it had to be easy to take apart so we can move it to the "real farm." And it had to look good enough to sit in the middle of the backyard. And not cost too much.

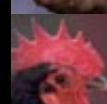
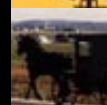
So this is what I came up with. This pen is 12 feet by 8 feet, 3 feet high, with wheels at one end and a gate at the other for the ducks to go in and out of. (Since Campbell ducks need a gradual takeoff and can't fly far anyway, 3 feet is more than enough to keep them in.) The frame is made from wood (untreated and painted) and is fenced in with chicken wire; we cover the top with bird netting to keep out hawks and freeloaded songbirds. At one end are hooks for a tarp that provides shade and a shelter from the rain as necessary.

We move the pen to a new location in the yard once or twice a week, then hose down the grass briefly to water in the manure. It is based on the idea of a "chicken tractor," a portable chicken coop that can be moved around to allow the chickens free access to fresh pasture without manure building up. This is the backyard version, more attractive, and gives the ducks more space than most chicken tractors (including ample room for a baby pool, as you can see in the photos). It has wheels at the back end; two people lifting from the front can easily move it, one can move it with difficulty—I am looking for the right sort of handles to allow one person to move it more easily.

Since most predators are nocturnal, this is plenty secure for daytime grazing. The bird netting keeps hawks out (a few leaves scattered on top helps them see it) and the pen will keep out neighbor dogs and cats (who have never climbed the four-foot fence around our yard to go after birds at the birdfeeder anyway).

Photos

Click any of the photos for a larger version.



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Movies

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◀ The grazing pen as it appears from the back of the house. Clearly the gate needs a hex sign; I'm working on it.



◀ The grazing pen with tarp. Note the ducks at lower left trying to figure out what I'm doing. As for the adirondack chairs, well, we don't have cable.



◀ Side view. Note the wheels at the back end.



◀ Closeup of the side of the pen. The post sticking up in the middle holds up one end of the tarp, so that rain will drain off towards the back of the pen.



◀ Top view. In the [enlarged photo](#) you can see the bird netting over the top.

Construction notes

Materials

The total cost of lumber, hardware, bird netting, tarp, and paint was \$130. I already had the chicken wire, and I had salvaged the wheels from an old reel lawn mower that I replaced the previous spring (a triumph for pack rats

everywhere). If I had bought the wire and wheels, it would probably have added \$30 to the cost of the pen.

- The wood frame is regular untreated 2x4-inch lumber, which is half the price of pressure-treated lumber. If the paint is maintained it will be fine outdoors. (It will certainly be fine if it never rains again, which as of June 2002 seems rather likely.)
- The chicken wire is 2-inch mesh, 3 feet high. I used a staple gun and 5/16-inch staples to fix it to the inside of the frame. (The length of staples was determined by a scientific survey of what I happened to have on hand.)
- The paint is interior/exterior latex enamel, over a latex exterior primer. Oil-based primer would be better but I had three-quarters of a gallon of latex leftover from another project.
- The gate is exterior plywood, sealed with deck sealer before painting. The latch is a barrel bolt (basically the simplest thing available).
- The wheels are about 8 inches in diameter, which is smaller than I would have bought, but they work quite well. I could not find wheels even this small for under \$10 each.
- The bird netting over the top of the pen is the kind sold for gardens, 12 feet square. (We got this idea from the Beginner's Guide to Indian Runner Ducks, a wonderful website that sadly is no longer available.)
- The tarp (which is not visible in the photos) is 6 feet by eight feet, black on one side and silver on the other to absorb or reflect sunlight depending on the season. The tarp cost about \$6 by mail-order from FarmTek, much less than I would have expected.

Construction

Building the pen took several afternoons and evenings—probably two weekends worth of afternoons and a week's worth of evenings. Because I wanted the pen to look good in the yard, all of the joints in the wood frame are half-lapped (so that the surface of each side is flat). The four sides are joined to each other by lag screws, which can be removed to break down the pen when we move in a few years.

- The pen is 8 feet by 12 feet, 3 feet high.
- I built each of the four sides of the pen separately with half-lap joints, which took a lot of extra time to cut by hand (I do not have a table saw) but make the finished pen look much nicer than if I had simply screwed the boards together on top of each other. The joints are secured with galvanized deck screws.
- On the front, the bottom of the frame rests on the ground; on the sides and back, it is 3 inches off the ground, so that the front end rests on the ground evenly with the wheels. (Or rather, it would if we had any level

ground for it to rest on. It is close enough.)

- I joined the sides at the ends with 3-1/2-inch lag screws, one at each of the eight corners of the pen, which can be removed to break down the pen when we move to a bigger place.
- I hung the door on the finished front side before I joined the sides together—it was easier to fit it properly with the side lying flat on the ground—then removed the hardware and re-hung it after the pen was painted and finished. The barrel bolt I attached last, when the pen was standing; otherwise you never know if it will actually fit properly.
- We stapled the chicken wire to the inside of the frame after the pen was painted. Since the pen is the same height as the wire, the wire comes all the way to the ground. (Well, again: it would if the ground were level. In practice there is usually a gap somewhere of an inch or so, but this is not enough to let predators in.)
- When the tarp is on the pen, it is attached to one pair of screw eyes at the back of the pen and one pair about 4 feet in, on a 1-foot post extending over the top of the frame; so two feet or so of tarp hang down over the back edge of the pen. The idea here is that the rain will run off the tarp and away from the back of the pen, and should it ever rain, I will be able to test this theory. A short length of rope tied to the grommets on the tarp with an S-hook at the other end allows easy installation and removal of the tarp.
- The bird netting is secured to the chicken wire with clothespins.

If I get really ambitious, I will draw up proper plans and post them here as a PDF file, but my pencil sketches and scrawled notes, most of which I revised in my head as I actually built the thing, would not be of much use here.