

# Guide to Care and Handling of Game Birds



University of Illinois Extension

You can savor the hunt at the dinner table if the game meat is handled properly along the way. Game birds have their own distinctive flavors and are excellent sources of protein, similar to domestic birds. The fat and calorie contents vary according to the age and species of the birds.

Wild game birds can be 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.

Properly handling the meat at each step—from the field to the table—helps ensure the best possible eating quality.

A 3½ -ounce portion of game bird (before cooking) has about 150 calories and provides half the daily protein an average adult needs.



## YOUNG BIRD OR OLD BIRD?

You need to know whether your game birds are young or old in order to choose the best cooking methods. These guidelines will help you decide:

- Young birds usually have lighter legs, soft breastbones and flexible beaks.
- Old birds have darker, hard-skinned legs, brittle breastbones and inflexible beaks.



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More food safety  
information is available  
from your local  
University of Illinois  
Extension office.

## CARE IN THE FIELD

- Be prepared for the hunt. Remember to bring plastic gloves, a sharp hunting knife, light rope or nylon cord, plastic bags, clean cloths or paper towels, and a cooler filled with ice.
- 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.
- Leave an identification mark on the bird as required by state hunting regulations.
- n Clean your hunting knife often with clean water and a cloth to prevent contamination of the meat.
- Improper temperature is meat's worst enemy. Cool the carcass quickly. Allow air to circulate in the carcass by hanging or laying the bird in a well-ventilated place.
- The heart, liver and gizzard may be saved for giblets. Store in a plastic bag on ice to keep them clean and cold.
- Game birds may be plucked or skinned in the field. Properly dispose of all waste.
- Do not pile warm birds in a mass.
- Store the birds in a cooler or ice chest out of the sun.
- In warm weather place individual birds in separate plastic bags and put on ice.
- Keep the carcass clean. Wipe out the cavity with a paper towel or clean cloth and clean water.
- Do not use grass or snow to wipe out the carcass, because this may contaminate the meat.
- Keep the carcass cool during transport.
- The best way to store birds is in a cooler on ice. If this is not possible, keep your vehicle well ventilated and put birds on the back seat or floor.
- Do not transport birds in the trunk. This enclosed space does not allow heat to escape from the birds.



## PROCESSING AND STORAGE

- Don't cross-contaminate meat. Wash knives, hands and cutting boards with hot soapy water and rinse thoroughly.
- Ducks and geese can be prepared with or without the skin. If the skin is removed, a moist cooking method is recommended.
- With upland birds, such as pheasant, quail or grouse, skin or pluck the bird. Then, soak in cold water for one to two hours in the refrigerator to remove excess blood.
- Birds generally do not require aging.
- Freeze meat while it is fresh and in top condition. Freeze the whole carcass or individual parts. The advantage of packaging parts instead of the whole bird is that bloody spots can be cut out or rinsed out with cold water.
- Prevent *freezer burn* by using moisture/vapor-proof wrap such as heavily waxed freezer wrap, laminated freezer wrap, heavy-duty aluminum foil or freezer-weight polyethylene bags.
- Press air out of packages before sealing. Label packages, indicating contents and date.
- Game will keep 9 to 12 months in the freezer if properly wrapped.



## CARE IN THE KITCHEN

- For immediate use, store the meat in the refrigerator (below 40°) and use within two or three days. Keep raw meat and cooked meat separate to prevent cross-contamination.
- Thaw frozen meat in the refrigerator or microwave oven. Foods thawed in the microwave oven should be cooked immediately. Refrigerator-thawed meat should be used within one to two days.
- Always cook game meats thoroughly.
- Game meats should be cooked to at least 165° F. Juices should run clear, and there should be no pinkness in the meat.
- Game birds can be prepared like chicken. Dry cookery methods, such as frying, are appropriate for young birds. Moist cookery methods, such as stewing or braising, are better for older birds.
- To decrease the distinctive taste of some wild game, trim off all visible fat.
- Older or skinned birds may become dry during baking. Wrap birds with bacon to prevent drying.
- Use leftovers within one or two days, or freeze them for later use.