



## **Rhea Eggs - Incubation, Hatching and Rearing**

### **Pre-incubation...**

Turn the eggs twice a day and keeping them cool. The eggs ideally should be less than one week old. On receipt of the egg, set it on its side and let it settle for the rest of the day before putting it in the incubator at night. If you have a candler check for air bubbles, a sign that the egg has been roughly handled in transit, an egg with air bubbles won't hatch.

### **Incubation...**

Incubator temp is 36-36.5 degrees with humidity set about 45%. Smaller incubators may not be so well insulated meaning the heat will be on more drying out the atmosphere and the eggs. I recommend weighing the eggs before you set them and checking them regularly. Aim for moisture loss of 15% over the duration of the incubation.

Rhea eggs take 36 to 41 days to hatch but ours have tended to hatch at around 36 days. The eggs should be set on their sides or dull end upwards and turned through 180 deg. every 3 hours or so. If you are doing this by hand turn them, leave them 3 hours then turn them back to the original position – don't keep turning them in one direction because you will tangle the cords that hold the yolk in place and kill the embryo. Aim to turn an odd number of times through the day so the eggs don't lie on the same side every night. You will always be better with a Fully Automatic Incubator for doing this!

The earliest you can candle for fertility really is 10 days before then is really guess work.

### **Hatching...**

Rhea eggshells are very strong so high humidity for hatching is really essential approx 65%. If you use a separate hatcher or the hatching tray at the base of our machines move the eggs there once they have pipped around 34 days. Be careful because if the chicks haven't pipped when you move them then the humidity could kill them. Use a candler to see the birds beak as a shadow in the air cell. You might also hear the chick crying in the shell – a sure sign they have pipped.

Remember the chicks will be about 8 to 10 inches high when they hatch so you need plenty headroom. Hatching temp. is 35.5 degrees. Humidity is 65%+.

### **Rearing...**

Don't leave them in the hatcher/incubator for too long – let them dry off and come to themselves. There will be a lot of rumbling around and crying. If ours hatch am we have them out in the afternoon but if they hatch in the pm leave them in until the next day if you can.

The chicks are reared under a heat lamp and on rubber with a square of carpet underlay which is soft and bobbly giving them something to get a grip on with their feet – that lasts for about 4 or 5 days just until they get going.

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# Oak Tree Poultry

*Traditional & Rare Breeds,  
Rheas & Specialist Incubators*

Becareful not to raise chicks on wood chippings as anything they can pick up or they WILL eat it which obviously will cause all sorts of problems.

It is also important to make sure that the chicks do start eating within 24 hrs or so as if they are not eating within the first few days or so they seem to loose the interest and will perish.

Provide water and food at head height – anything on the deck and they will fall over it and into it etc. Start them on chick crumbs with - chopped lettuce, chopped hard-boiled egg and a tiny amount of cod liver oil mixed through – on the top of the crumbs. The green attracts them. Pop some chopped lettuce on the water too. They won't eat much on the first day but once they start they will devour food fast. If they are tricky to get to eat, use a beaker with the mix in it to get the food 'in their face' if you like. A red pencil tapping at the food also attracts them. Time spent in the first few days watching what they eat and drink is well spent.

Keep crumbs in front of them 24/7, by day 3 they should be rushing to feed when you give them their lettuce and egg mix, drinking well and producing copious amounts of urine. When you see them running and jumping by day 3, you can relax and enjoy your chicks.

That should get you going. Good luck.



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## - Rearing Rhea Chicks -

Once your chicks are dried off – it doesn't take long, and they are keen to be out – get them out to the brooder. We brood our chicks on rubber with a square of carpet underlay under the light to give them something to grip and its cosier. Use a circle of cardboard about 3ft diameter to contain the chicks within the larger run that is about a metre wide and 2.5 metres long. The temperature from the heat lamp needs to be about 35 degrees – be careful to start with because the enclosed space can heat up quickly. Make sure the run is free from anything they shouldn't eat like nails, bits of stick – even if you think they will never eat that – don't kid yourself. The first day out of the hatcher, they will cry incessantly – just looking for the cover of a big bird. That will stop by Day 2 and you only get that again if they are stressed.

Offer food from the beginning – nothing is more important than getting the birds to eat. We use chick crumbs mixed with chopped hard-boiled egg and lettuce with a drop of cod liver oil added. The egg gives extra protein and they love it but to start with it is the lettuce that will attract them. We put the food in a small stainless steel dog dish and raise it to head height otherwise the chicks will trip over it continually. Same with water – put a big stone in the dish and float some lettuce on top – they will pick at the green of the lettuce and get water. Those shiny marbles can help attract them to food too just don't leave them in for too long or they will disappear. Use a red pencil to tap at the food dish and get them eating. Don't expect them to eat a lot to start with but keep encouraging them – in the first few days the eating instinct is good and you will see them throwing their heads back and making swallowing actions – if they lose that action before they are eating properly then it is very difficult to get them going again. If it is really hot pop some ice cubes in the water to keep it fresher. Once you get them eating properly they will start to jump and twist and look generally happy to be alive, then you can take down the cardboard and let them have the run of the run. At about 3 days you will find they almost flood the run with watery urine – a good sign you've cracked it. Then you just have to have time to watch them because they are brilliant.

After a few more days – if you get a really nice day – get them out for a run on grass – they will love it. You will need to contain them in a run outdoors or they will take off to the four winds and you'll have a heck of job catching them. Again make sure they can't pick up anything they shouldn't. Give them just 10 minutes or so to start with before getting them back under the heat but you could get them out 2 or 3 times on a fine day. As they get bigger keep raising the heat lamp a fraction – you'll know if they are cold or too hot as you get used to them.

Continue with the starting feed mix for 10 days and once you get them out regularly offer them more lettuce in the outside run. They will take it whole – gives them something to do, put food and water in their run as well.

You will find that they produce copious amounts of runny poo but that's better than trying to give them too much dry food and getting them bugged up. They might get bugged up if they eat too much grass early on but if that happens try a very little amount of Liquid Paraffin syringed down their throat.

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You can start them on grower crumbs at about 3 weeks – mix a little in with their starter and gradually get them onto it and just keep at it with the lettuce. Gradually as they get bigger you can offer them other vegetables, sliced or grated like beetroot, potato cabbage etc. They take a bit of time to get used to something new but get there eventually.

By about 4 or 5 weeks you can start to bed them on chopped hay or straw. Up until this point I just use rubber mats changed regularly. If you put them on bedding too early they will eat it and cause no end of problems so just persevere with hosing down mats and trying to keep them as clean as possible. 2 or 3 aren't too messy, it's when you get pens of 8 or 9 that you know what poo is. It's pretty easy just to keep a shovel and paper handy to clean up poo as you come to expect it at their eating times and if you catch it before they walk through it – it is much easier.

From about 3 months we offer them crushed grains in with their feed – by this time you will have them on stock nuts too. Once the weather gets too cold and wet we keep them in 24/7 until spring. Once we are bedding them on hay or straw we don't muck out – just keep adding fresh bedding, it gives them something to grip on and prevents them sliding on the concrete or whatever. You will find that they keep their bed pretty clean. Leave the heat lamp with them until you find them not sleeping under it – probably by about 3 months. In spring they go out and that's it, there is no need to bring them in again – they are very hardy.

As they mature the male will make his characteristic booming noise. He will pull himself up to full height, fluff out his feathers and make himself as scary as possible – wings straight up behind his head and charge. A dustbin lid is a good deterrent. He will also breathe very smelly breath on you. He is just protecting his girls. Mating pairs mate regularly, it can be vicious with a lot of pecking and biting. If you are not sure if mating is taking place – you can check the back of the girls neck – you'll see a bare patch where the male has held on with his beak. If mating is happening then eggs are being laid. Once mating has taken place, the male is a very sorry looking specimen for about 10 minutes – totally spent. He hangs his head, his insides gurgle and he looks like he is going to expire. We feed our adults on stock nuts and during egg laying they get layers pellets too. Feed them ad lib. The birds regulate their intake of stock nuts or layers pellets as they see fit. When egg laying finishes they fill up on stock nuts for the winter.

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