

Proper Care and Handling of Game Birds from Field to Table



To reduce the risk of foodborne illness, hunters need to handle, process, and prepare game birds properly, being careful to prevent contamination from the field to the table. This publication contains guidelines and helpful hints to help you ensure the food you're providing is safe.



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Bring These Items When You Hunt

A sharp knife

A whetstone or steel for sharpening

Rope or nylon cord

Clean cloths or paper towels

Sealable storage bags

A cooler full of ice or snow

Disposable plastic gloves for dressing

Clean drinking water

Field Dressing

- To reduce the risk of exposure to disease, wear disposable plastic gloves while handling birds.
- Use clean water, premoistened wipes, or alcohol swabs to clean the knife frequently or between cuts to avoid dragging bacteria into the meat.
- Using a clean knife, make a small lateral incision on the underside of the breast and then pull the skin and feathers off the carcass.
- From the top side, cut down both sides of the back, starting near the head and cutting through to the last rib.
- Separate the carcass by pulling the breast apart from the neck, back, and legs. The intestinal tract, heart, lungs, and liver will remain attached to the back portion of the carcass.
- Avoid cutting the crop, gizzard, or intestines, since bacteria associated with foodborne illness may be found in these organs.
- Remove the feet and lower legs at the joint below the drumsticks.
- If the organs smell offensive or exhibit greenish discharge, black blood, or blood clots in the muscle, do not consume meat from this carcass. Discard the carcass properly.
- If keeping variety meats, place the heart and liver in a plastic storage bag and store on ice or snow, or refrigerate as soon as possible.
- For identification purposes, leave either the head or a fully feathered wing. This is required by the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

Hints for Field Dressing

- Dress the carcass as soon as possible.
- Remove all visible dirt, feces, feathers, and bloodshot areas.
- Wipe out the cavity with individual paper towels. Prop the cavity open with a clean stick or hang the carcass to aid in air circulation.
- Do not pile warm birds together.
- If you wash the cavity with water, dry the area quickly to prevent spoilage.

- To prevent bacterial growth, quickly cool the carcass to 35–40°F (2–4°C).
- After cleaning the cavity, place carcasses in plastic storage bags and pack on ice or snow, or refrigerate as soon as possible.
- Keep carcasses out of direct sunlight and allow for adequate air circulation.
- Young birds have lighter legs, softer breastbones, and flexible beaks. Older birds have darker, hard-skinned legs, brittle breastbones, and inflexible beaks.

Transporting and Processing Game Birds

- Keep carcasses cool during transport. Keep them out of sunlight. Do not put birds in a vehicle's trunk while still warm. Allow for adequate air circulation.
- Hold the carcass at 40°F (4°C) or lower. Freezing the carcass before processing may toughen the meat.
- If aging a carcass, do so at 40°F (4°C) or lower (but do not freeze) for two to three days.
- During processing, frequently clean your knife between cuts to avoid contaminating the meat. Wash your knife, hands, and cutting boards often with warm, soapy water.
- When preparing ducks, remove the wings by cutting them off at the joints, remove the head, and pluck out the pin feathers.
- Remove feathers by dipping the carcass in a paraffin wax/hot water mixture. Scrape off the feathers after the wax has hardened.
- Soak grouse, pheasant, quail, and partridge carcasses in cold water for one to two hours to remove excess blood.

Kitchen Processing

- Store any unfrozen meat in the refrigerator and use it within two to three days.
- Save the carcass and neck bones to make a soup base.
- Keep raw meat separated from ready-to-eat foods in the refrigerator to prevent cross-contamination.
- Marinate all meats in the refrigerator.
- Thaw all frozen meats in the refrigerator; under cold, running water; or microwave and cook immediately.
- Heat all game bird meats to 165°F (74°C) to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. Use a calibrated food thermometer to ensure proper cooking temperature is reached.
- If you will be stuffing birds, stuff just before cooking. Use a calibrated food thermometer to ensure a final cooked internal temperature of 165°F (74°C) for both the stuffing and the bird.

- Game birds must be canned in a pressure canner. Dial gauge canners should be tested yearly for accuracy. Follow guidelines from the *USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning* (2015 revision).
- Use leftovers within one or two days, or freeze for later use.

Freezing and Smoking Tips

- Freeze meat while it is still fresh.
- Cut and package meat into meal-size portions.
- Use heavily waxed paper, freezer wrap, heavy duty aluminum foil, or plastic freezer storage bags for meat storage.
- Wrap meat tightly and remove all air from the bag before sealing.
- Label packages with contents and dates.
- Space packages in freezer to allow proper air circulation for cooling and freezing.
- Once packages are solidly frozen (within 24 hours), you can restack them within the freezer.
- Properly wrapped meat will store in the freezer for 9 to 12 months.
- To avoid quality deterioration, do not refreeze thawed products.

For more information about food safety, contact Penn State's Department of Food Science at 814-865-5444 or visit the Penn State Extension food safety website at **extension.psu.edu/food-safety-and-quality**.

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