

Why choose Muscovy ducks?

We have been breeding Muscovy for seven years now and, while they are a very versatile bird, still little is known about them. Whilst they are a duck, they are also referred to as a South American Goose. This article is based on our own opinions and experiences of these wonderful and unusual "duck geese."

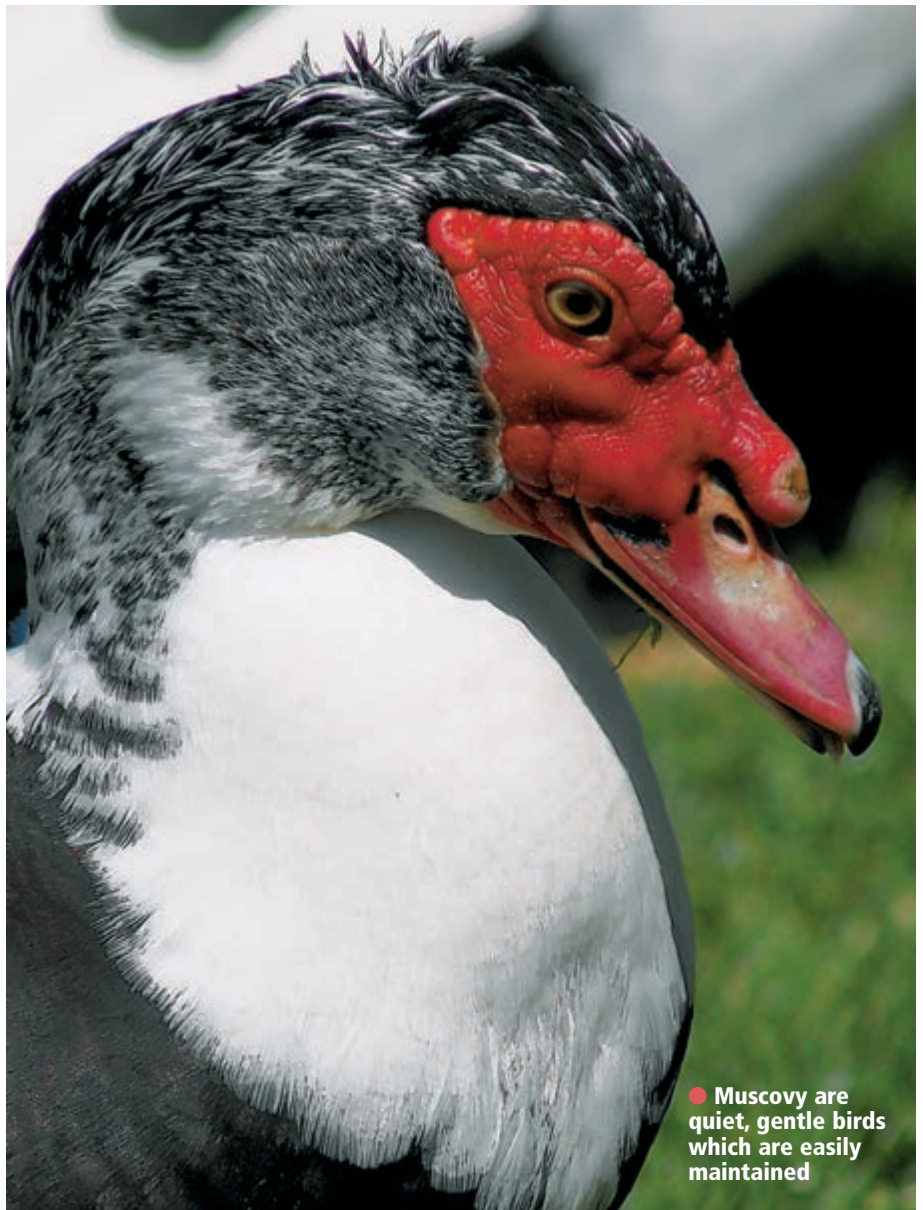
Muscovy drakes when ducklings are as beautiful as any other duck I have seen. When they mature, their body elongates and they become much larger than the females. As they grow their faces change phenomenally and rather than 'the ugly duckling turning into a swan' some may see it as the reverse! The beautiful duckling will eventually have a varying amount of vivid red 'bulges' on its face referred to as caruncles. Some may not find this attractive but the ducks sure do.

Their feet are wide and very geoselike in the drakes and Muscovy tend to have longer claws allowing them to perch in trees or on fences. You can differentiate between a duck and a drake by the length and width of the legs and feet. Obviously experienced handlers can sex a duck from a very early age (called vent sexing) but many still keep you guessing.

Muscovy are a gentle duck and not aggressive to each other or others. They don't make much noise which is rather unfortunate as they won't alert you to the presence of foxes as other ducks would, so it's best to keep your Muscovy safe. On the other hand, having quiet ducks is a bonus if you have neighbours in close proximity.

The claws on a Muscovy should not be allowed to curl over. If they don't have access to a hard surface, such as concrete, it's a good idea to use a pair of dog nail clippers to trim them. The claws have a quick (such as in a dog's nails) but washing them will make the quick clearly visible and can be avoided. If in doubt, ask an expert to help you. Claws don't often need trimming but they are worth keeping an eye on. Preventing curled claws is important so the birds can walk properly and will also ensure that mating drake's don't hurt the female when treading. With such long claws, the birds do look like mini Pterodactyls so it is advisable to wear gloves.

A Muscovy will not fight you or struggle so handle them calmly and quietly and they can become very tame and happy to take their favourite titbits from your hands.



● Muscovy are quiet, gentle birds which are easily maintained

by **HELEN
KENDALL**

Differing features

Drakes don't hiss, quack or whimper as a female Muscovy will. Also, the face on a more mature male bird will have more caruncles and the head feathers will eventually stand up to a greater degree than a duck's which is called a crest.

It can be interesting for those who aren't experts to try to differentiate between ducks

and drakes as many ducks also have quite a lot of facial 'red bulge' and they, like us, mature at different rates. The ducks, too, have feathers on the top of their heads which stand up to a certain degree and even more when curious or startled becoming a quite a visible coiffure.

To add to the confusion, as with many other ducks, there is a distinct pecking order in the flock. So when you see what you think is a drake jumping on a duck, it may be a 'telling off' from one female to another rather than a potential mating. It's better to wait until the drakes have grown much bigger and longer before trying to sex them

Reproduction

Muscovy drakes are usually highly sexed. They do not take 'no' for an answer on dry ground or in pool/pond/puddle. Muscovy will mate on land just as happily as in water, unlike many other ducks. To ensure your duck is not receiving too much 'attention' from the Drake, either remove the drake at night or give him several ducks to his harem. If you can, a good ratio of Muscovy drake is to have five available ducks. He will not necessarily mate them all but he will have a choice. However, just to keep you guessing, it is quite common for a Muscovy male to prefer one female above all others and to stay by her side much of the time. You may not necessarily notice when he mates other ducks when the need arises. Make sure, if you let her sit on her eggs, that the drake has actually mated the duck sitting on the eggs or it will be a futile wait. You can test the eggs by candling them to see if they are fertile.

Muscovy drakes will mate other ducks of different breeds so be careful to keep your Muscovy drakes separate from other ducks. If allowed to mate a different breed, the Muscovy half-bred duckling which comes from that mating will usually be infertile and is often called a mule. Do remember that the entire clutch from a cross-bred mating will be infertile including the the half bred duckling drakes.



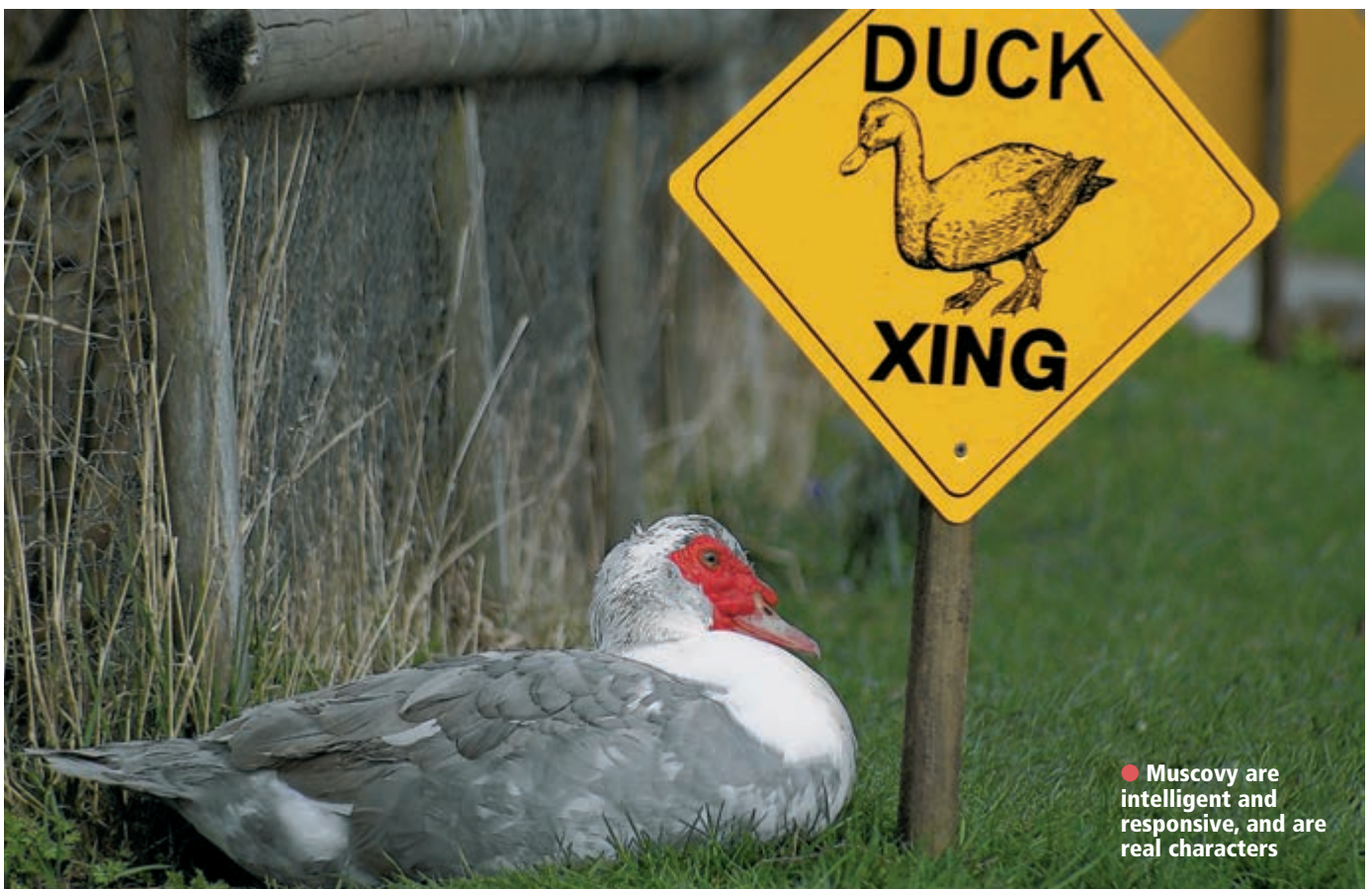
● **Muscovy come in many colours and there is a wide variety of markings**

All breeders of Muscovy ducks have their own ideas of how to keep them so don't worry; there is no right or wrong way of drake management.

A frequent question is whether the drake should be kept in the same area, pen or house as the nesting mother before and/or after the ducklings are hatched. There isn't one answer as it is dependent on a range of factors such as the temperament of the drake or if there are other birds in close proximity. For example, if

you have a bad-tempered drake who is very aggressive (we would not keep one like this ourselves but many do) I would be very wary of keeping it near the female once her ducklings have hatched or indeed when sitting.

Cockerels kept near drakes will also make them more defensive, making it wise to separate the drake from the duckling. Most ducklings are killed by accident rather than deliberately but it does happen. There are other practicalities to consider which include



● **Muscovy are intelligent and responsive, and are real characters**

the size of your grazing area and hatching house. Keeping birds in a small area increases the chance of a drake killing a newly-hatched duckling.

We let the drakes free range with the ducks but hatching females are penned alone and nest alone in their houses. They enjoy the privacy, special attention and a break from mating. When our ducklings are hatched, they have an area away from the drakes – ours only rejoin the drakes when they are of a reasonable size, usually when they are around three weeks old.

Some drakes are absolutely fine with ducklings from day one and can be trusted with them. Others can get very excited so should be kept separate until the ducklings are big enough to be with the drakes. You also have to consider that the drake may attempt to mate with the female. She will be weak from sitting on the eggs for a long period and will have lost weight. Mating can damage or even kill her, leaving you with the ducklings to rear yourself. Much is dependent on your duck houses, facilities and the temperament of your birds.

As I've already said, there is no right or wrong way but be prepared to accept responsibility for possibly consequences. Most breeders I know do not let the drake sleep in the same house as a nesting female, and keep their drakes separate for a while after hatching. Equally, many just let nature take its course and they all live together as they would in the wild.



● **Muscovy ducks are a beautiful breed to those who get to know them**

Capabilities

Muscovy drakes can certainly fly. However, they stay long and low and tend only to hop onto a fence, into a tree or across a field. Once mature, they fly less as they are normally too heavy to go far. Muscovy will stay at home and

follow orders like Pavlov's dog. They are intelligent, easy to train to come when called and can be driven gently where you want them to go. Muscovy of either sex are no speed merchants. They walk as if suffering from gout which can often be mistaken for lameness when it is not. The rolling, ponderous preamble of a mature drake is a sight to behold and one wonders how he ever finds the energy to get the job done. Unlike many other ducks, the Muscovy is the Parker Knoll of the duck world and is built for comfort not speed.

Colours

Muscovy can be many colours. Most are referred to as 'something and white'. Some refer to it as 'pied' - not to be confused with 'Maggie Pied' which can be black and white, chocolate and white, lavender and white or others. 'Solid' refers to birds who almost totally one colour and in this instance could be white, chocolate, black or lavender. There are an infinite number of variations of Muscovy markings with intense discussions as to whether the head should be the colour of the body or not when 'something and white'. Look up the breed definitions and decide for yourself!

A 'capped' bird can be lavender, black or chocolate. This means the bird's body will be one of these colours and white with a colour cap on its head. A 'bare-headed' bird is also



● **'Pied' lavender duck and drake perching**



● Muscovy need access to water for drinking and to rewaterproof daily

lavender, black or chocolate and white but without the cap.

A 'magpie' will always be black and white. The markings of a show bird should be equal on both sides and distinct and the cap not too far down the back of the head. Non standardised colours include: blue, buff, rippled amongst others.

Why Muscovy?

- Quiet, gentle birds, easily maintained and great bug eaters
- Need minimal but essential water facilities for weatherproofing
- Excellent mothers, raising large clutches (including other breeds) happily
- Intelligent, responsive, friendly greetings from a Muscovy
- Can fly if a fox comes
- Sociable with other domestic pets
- Unique 'rap' greeting to each other
- Drakes can live happily as a social group
- Can be driven to a new area
- Can come to call if named
- Can be trained to nest in certain areas
- Beautiful to all get to know them
- Large excellent eggs
- Slow moving so easy to catch



● A capped lavender drake

Eggs

Muscovy eggs are milky-coffee white and have a greater circumference (but are not necessarily longer) than normal duck eggs such as Indian Runner or Khaki Campbell which are themselves larger than chicken eggs.

Compared with a standard supermarket free range chicken egg, the Muscovy egg will normally be rounder, lighter colour and definitely heavier. They are excellent for baking.

Muscovy will normally start laying from eight to ten months old – weather permitting. However, a duckling which is eight months old in October will usually wait until the New Year to start laying.

A duckling born in September is called a late hatch. It too may start laying from eight months but will usually come into lay during the warmer months, from May onwards. There are no hard and fast rules with Muscovy. They will sometimes take a break from laying in the

hottest month, such as August, but will most often come back into lay. Few Muscovy will lay all year round and most will stop around October, restarting from January onwards, depending on their ages. A mature Muscovy who has had a clutch or two will usually be the first to start laying in the New Year – but not always. Making a nest is usually a sign that the duck will soon come into lay. In a group of Muscovy ducks, the oldest will usually start making nests first, but again there are no hard and fast rules.

If you are keeping the eggs for eating, then there is no need for the eggs to be fertilised by a drake. In fact, fertilised eggs left in warm conditions may well go off quicker than unfertilised eggs so keep the drake separate from some of your ducks and mate only the girls you think/hope/feel are broody and will sit to incubate the eggs.

Muscovy vary on an individual basis as to how many eggs they feel are enough before they will sit. Do not disturb the nest or the duck will abandon the nest. Some mature ducks will wait to have as many as 24 eggs before sitting, others much fewer. If you pop a few eggs from another breed into her nest, the Muscovy duck doesn't seem to mind or worry if her offspring don't look at all like her!

Do remember that, like first-time mums, the first egg is always the most difficult, often misshapen and sometimes a little bloodied.



● This duck will grow up to be a solid chocolate Muscovy

This is perfectly normal and thereafter the duck will lay easily. Please do remember that duck eggs are more porous than chicken eggs and should not be washed. If a duck lays in water, or outside and it gets muddy or rained on it is best to immediately destroy the egg. Duck eggs should be refrigerated (unless incubating of course) and brought out from the fridge some 30 minutes before use. Refrigerated eggs will not hatch.

Incubation

Geese and most ducks take 28 days sitting but a Muscovy can take between 36 and 37 days. Please note that the day the duck sits properly, i.e. not getting on or off intermittently is the first day of sitting. It is 35 days after this that the ducklings will start to hatch but it can take up to five days for the duckling to get out if some are late starters. This is not for the impatient.



● A blue capped pied Muscovy duck

Muscovy ducks are exceptionally biddable and particularly broody mums so are easy to hatch other ducks's eggs under them or even a goose egg.

Please do not forget to cover the pond or remove if possible, if putting chickens' eggs under a duck because chickens do not swim. However, do make sure the mother duck can access water for rewaterproofing and cleaning (ie a pond, bath or bucket) in the meantime.

Muscovy ducks need regular access to weatherproofing facilities, food and clean water whilst sitting; she will only leave the nest for a very short period in order to see to her own daily needs. Ducklings must be protected immediately upon hatching and for the entire clutch to be hatched can take up to 48 hours per egg over a five-day period.

Maintenance

Muscovy do require ponds, containers or baths they can safely get in and out of in order to douse themselves thoroughly. The Muscovy needs to refresh, cleanse and weatherproof on a daily basis. This can be a messy business and a bath on concrete with bricks and ramps for the birds to get in and out is ideal. A kiddie's sandpit full of water is fine but it must be made from hard plastic and not a fragile material which the Muscovy's claws can rip. A large washing up bowls is ideal.

It's essential that the bird can get safely in and out of any water facility. Ponds can be built without too much difficulty or expense but must be regularly emptied as stagnant water over a long period of time can hold stagnant nasties as can streams that dry out in summer.

Obviously, ponds aerated with a pump system or appropriate plants will provide fresh water but the flow has to be constant. Clean drinking water is essential so if you have large numbers of birds the water baths must be regularly emptied and refilled during the day. If the drinking water bowl is large enough one of them is bound to bath in it.

Feeding

In our opinion, all birds should be helped through the winter months with a regular regime. The first feed in the morning before being let out (if penned) with another feed at night to encourage them to come in. But, whatever the regime, it must work for both you and the birds. It's a good idea to keep your birds inside until it is full daylight for two reasons. Firstly, fox attacks are far less likely and secondly, the birds are more likely to lay first thing and get used to the regime.

When purchasing a bird it's a good idea to ask the breeder for some of the bird's food to



● Caruncling increases with age in a drake

take with you. That way, you can gradually introduce the feed you plan to give the birds into their original diet.

Ducks can happily survive on smallholder mixed corn with oyster shell and nothing else. Others feed layers pellets, normally used for poultry, of which there are many manufacturers. And finally, some owners feed specialised duck and goose feeds. It is better to feed little and often so the birds clear the food, rather than leave feed out to get eaten by wild birds or rats.

Housing should be off the ground to prevent rats setting underneath and water rotting the house material. It should be secure from foxes and other wildlife looking for food. Size depends on the number of birds and on whether you expect the birds to sit in this house. Few Muscovy ducks will nest and sit in a house where other ducks are brought in at night, so adequate provision should be made because not all ducks will lay or sit at the same time.

Socializing

Muscovy will interact with family pets once they are used to them. Dogs do not frighten them and, if of a reasonably gentle nature, will happily play amongst the ducks. If mixing new Muscovy with an existing cat or dog, make sure you stay in the vicinity each time until all the animals are happy.

Will a dog attack a Muscovy? Not unless the dog is of that disposition. Will a cat kill a

Muscovy? Not unless it's an unprotected, tiny duckling. Muscovy may be silent warriors but when flapping wings and in groups they are extremely protective, especially of their young.

Size

Ducks vary in size tremendously but if you see the parents you will have a good idea of the size your ducks will grow to. Some domestic ducks grow no bigger than around the 5 to 7lb, but many can grow as big as 10lb. Drakes usually come in around 9 to 13lb but many will go to 16lb. Some people breed for smaller birds and others for larger. Imported American genetics in Muscovy tend to breed bigger birds.

Greetings

If you like the Muscovy, you will enjoy the greetings when you visit them or when they are first let out of their houses in the morning. They will wag their tails and coo to you and then do a wonderful rap-like dance with heads bobbing up and down to you and to each other, it is amazing and unique to the Muscovy.

We keep our drakes separately from the ducks and they live happily, growing to maturity before their future is decided. However, we are fortunate enough to have land in front of our house so we are able to do this without crowding the birds.

Muscovy, unlike many other birds, do not migrate. Wild Muscovy can still be found often in Central America, South America and Mexico. ●