

MUSCOVY DUCKS

Gail Harland



Domesticated in their native Central America before the Spanish conquest, Muscovies, particularly the males, are large ducks known by the scientific name *Cairina moschata*. They are unrelated to most other breeds of domestic duck, which are derived from the wild mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). Infertile hybrids between the two species are often bred for meat, referred to as Barbary duck. Muscovies have long claws on their toes, an adaptation that enables them to perch in trees, although mine have never shown any inclination to do so. Wild muscovies usually have glossy black plumage but domestic birds show many colours including lavender and pied, black and white, and white. Mine are chocolate brown, hence the names of Cadbury for my female and Bendicks for her mate. Some people find male Muscovies unappealing as they have pronounced red caruncles (fleshy growths) around their bills but I think it adds to their interest.

In many ways Muscovies are more like dogs than ducks. They are very intelligent birds that seem to enjoy human company and have an endearing way of wagging their tails and nodding their heads as they greet you. They do not quack like other ducks but have a strange greeting noise, somewhat like a rasping cough. Cadbury will happily sit

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by me for an hour at a time when I am working in the garden but will huff indignantly if I try to stroke her. Bendicks is a great character and as soon as you let him out in the morning he will do his rounds going to greet all the other birds. He is however distinctly oversexed and when trying his luck with the geese, earned himself a broken wing from the gander. He behaved beautifully at the vets and after four weeks with his wing tightly bound to his body he recovered well, although the wing is now permanently short. He still likes to go across and visit the geese but fortunately is now treating them with more respect.

Ducks are really easy to keep. They need a fox-proof house to sleep in but a large garden pond is not necessary so long as you can provide a bath big enough for the duck to get in and completely immerse its head to keep the feathers in good condition. I found one at an agricultural show that is about 70cm in diameter; small and light enough to ensure that the daily changing of water does not become an onerous task that would get neglected. I feed each of mine a handful of chicken pellets or mixed corn in the morning and then they spend the day rummaging around in the grass, keeping the garden clear of slugs and snails. They are good foragers and are excellent at catching flies. They rarely go to bed of their own accord but have trained me to take them more grain at dusk, when they will dutifully follow me up to their house for the night.

Gail gardens and keeps chickens and ducks in Suffolk.