

Trenton and Gerald Dammann
Jeffers, Minnesota

Ducks That Don't Quack — Muscovy Ducks as an Alternate Enterprise

Trenton and Trina Dammann took an interest in poultry when participating in 4-H projects. Their father, Gerald, oversees the agricultural program at Red Rock High School in Lamberton, Minnesota, and the family farms near Jeffers, Minnesota. When Trenton was in eighth grade, he joined FFA and wanted a project that could compete nationally. “The kids took an interest in ducks because they like waterfowl more than chickens. Besides, everyone has chickens,” Gerald said. But they also wanted a different kind of duck. In the United States, the most popular breed of domestic duck is the White Pekin, a white duck that originated in China and grows to about eight to nine pounds. White Pekins are the primary duck used for retail grocery store sales. The Dammans looked into Muscovy, a species that originated in Brazil and grows up to fifteen pounds. They are primarily black and white in color and have a bright red crest around their head and beak. The Dammans learned from their customers that Hmong prefer the Muscovy (male) because of their larger size. “They kept asking us about the ducks that didn't quack,” Gerald said. “We thought they were talking about the male of every breed. About a year later, we found out they were talking about Muscovys. Muscovys don't quack, they hiss.” They picked up their first breeding stock of Muscovy that year. Trenton and Gerald started with 12 hens the first year, increasing to 24 hens the second year and 40 hens the third year.



Muscovy duck in Dammann barnyard.

Production

“Muscovys are prolific. They can hatch from 15 to 28 birds per nest. If you take their babies away, they'll take a small break, say a week, then turn around and start another nest. On the bad side, they're a late setter,” said Gerald. In an average year, Muscovys don't lay eggs until May. Muscovy eggs are also difficult to hatch in incubators. One method to promote hatching allows the mother to set for two weeks, then the eggs are finished in an incubator. Muscovy can also take 32 or more days to hatch while other breeds only take 28 days. For these reasons, few hatcheries offer Muscovy hatchlings.



Trenton feeding Muscovy ducklings in brooding pens.

Housing

Like most poultry, Muscovy require a warm environment during their first week. The Dammans start their flock in May and use heat lamps with infrared bulbs. They adjust lamp height based on duckling behavior: “Are they talking a lot? Are they huddling in a big mass under the light? Too cold. Are they circled around the lamp? Too hot. Let them tell you what they like,” Gerald advises.

Muscovy are slightly cannibalistic, so have to be provided sufficient room. Given adequate foraging space, Muscovy can grow to eleven pounds in twelve weeks. Gerald keeps the ducks in groups of 50 in 4 ft by 4 ft pens for the first week to week-and-a-half. Then, he doubles that space, moving them into long, narrow corn cribs until three weeks of age. Space is increased again at about six weeks of age, when he moves them

FARM PROFILE • Alternative Species: Muscovy Duck



Muscovy ducks in fenced yard with pools.

to a standard old barn with a cement apron outside. Inexpensive plastic swimming pools (one for every 100 ducks) provide the ducks with a place to swim. “When they’ve been in that barn for two to three weeks, eight to nine weeks of age, we’ll take them back to a very large fenced area to roam at will. We don’t bother to round them up at night, or pen them up,” said Gerald. This fenced area is at least an acre in size and holds about 500 ducks at a time.

Muscovy also have a “bean” on the tip of their bill used for pecking out of their shell. When crowded, they use this to peck each other. “That’s what you watch for when you raise a flock of Muscovy. You either trim off the bean or get them into a larger space,” said Gerald. He supplies tallow from the meat locker where Trenton works, giving the ducks something to pick at. Larger producers use large, dark (red lamp lighting) buildings to lessen the pecking tendencies.

“This year (2004), we’ll start them in groups of 400 so we don’t tax the pens too much. We’re contemplating three groups of 400.” Last year, they kept back about 30 hens for hatching their own eggs.

Feed

Muscovys are omnivorous. “I’m a believer that to help cut [feed] costs you need to get them outside to hunt bugs,” said Gerald. Evening feeding is generally when they forage for bugs. For the last four weeks, the Dammanns let the ducks forage at will in the fenced area, and pour out feed on the apron outside the barn twice a day. Gerald starts them out on standard Land O’ Lakes “crumbles” at 22 percent protein. “Non-medicated,” he advises. You don’t want to feed ducks any medication [because it can lead to lameness or death].” After three weeks, the Dammanns grind corn into mash, then add poultry concentrate to bring the protein to 18 percent. At six to seven weeks, they reduce the protein level to 16 percent. At ten weeks, Gerald adds cracked corn. He only raises ducks during the summer so they can find extra nutrients by their own foraging. At the peak of production, the Dammanns feed 16 five-gallon pails of mash per day.

Mortality has been low. Gerald attributes much of the mortality this last season (2003) to having too little space. Of the 525 ducks he started with, he marketed 465. About 50 percent of this loss was in the first 48 hours. To lower this mortality rate, he advises starting them in small groups and, rather than one large waterer, have several waterers spaced out over your pen. Predation is not much of an issue, but Gerald sets live traps to capture predators like raccoons. According to Gerald, it doesn’t pay to keep the ducks through the winter because they don’t tolerate severe cold. “Minnesota winters and open range Muscovys are not a good combination,” Gerald said.



Mash time for Muscovy ducks.

Labor

Initially, ducklings need to be watched and taken care of, making sure their water is fresh and feed is plentiful. Once the ducks are foraging, the labor requirements decrease to about 30 minutes each morning and evening. “We did have to pinion the wings so they wouldn’t fly and de-bean them so they wouldn’t peck each other.” Hatcheries will de-bean the birds for a fee. There’s no need to pinion the males, which are too heavy to fly. The hens need pinioning since they are lighter and can get airborne.

Finances

In 2003 Trenton took out a \$2,000 operating loan to produce 500 ducks. He was able to feed them and pay off the loan with the proceeds from their sale in August. In 2004, feed costs are higher, so it’ll cost more to finish them off. They are planning on obtaining a \$5,000 loan for three batches of 400 ducks.



Trenton and Gerald starting with a new batch of ducklings.

Marketing

The Dammanns market their ducks to the Hmong community at an outlet in South St. Paul. There is no processing involved, since their customers buy the ducks live and do their own butchering. The Dammanns do not sell by the pound, but get paid \$8 per bird, a premium price. Gerald has researched other markets and found \$6 per bird a common price. “There’s no profit in \$6 per bird,” he concludes.

“The clientele who want these birds are interested in much more than just the meat. They use the poultry product more in depth than we do. In fact, they (the Hmong) think we’re wasteful!” Gerald adds. One reason the Hmong prefer Muscovy is these ducks have less fat than other breeds.

Gerald and Trenton haul about 150 Muscovy per trip in a livestock trailer, traveling three hours to reach the market before it opens at 6:00 a.m. The ethnic market for the Muscovy may increase, as more Hmong immigrants settle in Minnesota. Still, Dammann is cautious. “I’m a little skeptical how much this market can bear. If the income isn’t there, they are going to eat \$3 chicken over \$8 duck.” Gerald doesn’t think he’ll produce more than 1,200 birds. His customers are the urban Hmong population, since Hmong living in rural areas usually have access to the same production possibilities as the Dammanns.

Gerald does have a few Muscovy ducks butchered for himself at a plant in Ashby, Minnesota, about three hours north of the Dammann farm. Be forewarned: Most poultry processors won’t process waterfowl. It’s best to check for processing availability before you venture into waterfowl.