

No Escape from Harsh Reality - the plight of domestic ducks and geese

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Go to any almost any park with a pond and you'll find abandoned domestic ducks and geese. Most people probably don't think about how the birds got there or why, and most also don't know the difference between a wild duck or goose (which has feathers long enough for flight, and muscles designed for quick take-offs) and a domesticated one (which has been bred to be slow and flightless). However, there is a big difference between an animal that is born with all the instincts it needs to live its life independently of humans, and a domesticated animal that depends on humans for food and shelter.

Cats and dogs are the most common domesticated animals, but go to any pet shop and you will also find wild animals for sale as pets. Lizards, turtles, tortoises, rats, parrots, and snakes are all wild animals, many taken from their native habitats, that are sold through the pet trade. So, it is understandable why people get confused when they go to a park pond and see wild ducks and geese mixed with domestic ones.

Domestic ducks and geese fall into a gray area, not classified as companion animals by the shelters, and not considered wild by wildlife rescue organizations. Animal shelters are not typically set up for injured wild animals, especially waterfowl, and many will refuse to take them. Since many vets aren't experienced with birds, when a homeless duck or goose is injured, it typically has nowhere to go for help. In the spring, when wildlife rescue centers are overwhelmed with orphans, some refuse to take hybrid ducklings.

Live Easter baskets

Much like baby rabbits, ducklings, goslings and chicks are also bought on impulse, by people who don't know anything about how to raise or house them, because they are "cute". Usually this happens around Easter when pet shops and feed stores sell them as Easter basket stuffers. Some are even dyed, just like Easter eggs, green, blue, lavender or pink. This can be very dangerous for children. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 1995 that chicks and baby ducks, as well as reptiles, can transmit Salmonella infection. [Before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#) banned the sale of turtles with a carapace length of 4 inches or less, thousands of children had become ill from handling baby turtles. Hopefully the FDA will soon enact a law banning the sale of baby ducks, geese and chicks in pet stores.

It's hard to understand what people are thinking when they buy pets on impulse and without educating themselves to the animal's needs and requirements. Animal shelters are filled to capacity largely due to ignorance. And so, already stressed from being sent over long distances in the mail, most of these birds will die from lack of warmth, proper nutrition and the stress of being

handled by children. With proper care, some will survive, but as their cuteness fades, and as they become big, and “messy,” many will inevitably make the car trip to a pond or lake to “fend for themselves.” A few, very lucky ones, will be raised properly, protected and loved. Although less common as pets, ducks, geese and chickens have individual personalities and character just like many other companion animals

When domestic ducks and geese are abandoned, their problems quickly compound. There is nothing to keep the domestic ducks, and geese, from mating with wild waterfowl, creating hybrids. This adversely alters the gene pool of wild birds, weakening it. When domestic ducks like pekings, rouens, khaki campbells and cayugas mate with mallards, instead of little brown ducklings, you’ll see yellow, brown, black and mixtures of colors. The resulting hybrids are much larger and heavier than mallards. When these males try to mate with wild mallards, they can injure and even drown them. Muscovys (a South American perching duck) cause terrible problems for mallards. Their large webbed feet and claws, literally tear the backs off females they are attempting to mate with.

Disease outbreaks

Domestic ducks can also carry many diseases which wild populations of ducks do not have immunity to and which there is no cure for. New Castle Disease, duck virus enteritis (DVE), fowl cholera, paratyphoid, avian tuberculosis, chlamydiosis, bird flu and West Nile virus are just some of the diseases that domestic ducks can transmit to wild flocks. In 1993, Muscovy ducks, released into the canals in Venice, California, tested positive for duck plague, duck virus enteritis (DVE), a fatal herpes virus spread through feces. Ducks and geese on the canals began to have violent seizures and then died.

People were feeding the ducks and geese, which can cause them to have more and larger clutches. The canals had become overpopulated. This leads to stress from too many birds in too small a habitat, resulting in fighting, injuries, death and disease. All the ducks and geese in the canals were rounded up by the California Department of Fish and Game and killed out of fear that some birds might fly to other areas and infect wild flocks.

This issue received international attention, when residents tried to save their favorite birds by taking them to secret locations in an attempt to save them. However, it was the release of domestic ducks, compounded by feeding and the resulting overpopulation that was the real tragedy. (The full story and debate can be found in the [Newsletter of the Santa Monica Bay Audubon Society](#), March 1994.

What do domestic ducks and geese look like?

Pekin ducks, which look like Donald Duck, are the most common ducklings sold. They are yellow when ducklings and turn pure white with orange bills and feet as they mature. Rouens originated in France and are domesticated mallards bred to be very large. Cayuga ducks are black with a beautiful green sheen. Khaki cambells look like light brown mallards. There are many other domestic breeds but these are the most common sold in feed stores and pet shops.

The goslings that are sold, typically at feed stores, are breeds like Chinese, African, and Embden. These grow to be quite large and are distinguished by various features. Chinese geese, which can be white, brown or a combination, have long necks and a distinctive “knob” above their bill. Emdens have shorter necks and blue eyes. African geese are shades of gray with black bills.

You won't find Canada goose goslings for sale in a pet or feed store. How come a wild caught parrot or tortoise can enter the pet trade, yet a Canada goose can't? Laws affecting wildlife vary from country to country, but in the United States, Federal laws protect migratory birds. It's illegal to capture, confine, trade, sell or even care for them if they are injured without the proper permits. However, if you go on the web, you'll find people selling anything and everything.

It's easy to see how people become confused when they see two groups of birds interacting at a park pond, some wild and some domestic. Canada Geese and mallards tend to tolerate humans more than other species and may even come close and take some bread; but come spring, they will migrate to their summer home. The domestics cannot escape. If they run out of food, they simply starve to death or die of complications from malnutrition due to diets of bread and crackers.

So what's wrong with bread and crackers? What do waterfowl naturally eat?

People derive great pleasure from taking their children to a local park that has ducks and geese and feeding them. These birds sometimes provide the only exposure to “wildlife” that many city kids ever experience and so it could be argued that the birds provide a service. But it is a disservice to feed them, especially when it is a steady diet of bread, crackers, chips, popcorn and the like. They can literally starve to death if that is all they get to eat. Geese are vegetarians and need access to vegetation. Ducks are mainly vegetarian but they require some protein. Both will eat grains and corn.

You may see wild ducks and geese in a cornfield or wheat field after harvest; they are eating the raw, unprocessed product, a whole food. Along with grains they are getting grasses, shoots of weeds, worms, snails, and bugs. In the water they tip to graze shallow areas for water plants, consuming small fish when they find them. Mallards “dabble” the surface of the water for bugs, mosquito larvae and floating vegetation. Birds fly to different areas for different foods, so they have a wide variety of foods, but plants and vegetation comprise most of their diet.

People mean well when they bring big bags of bread and crackers and it is difficult for them to understand that they are killing the birds with their kindness. Bread fills the birds up, swelling in their stomach, but providing no nutritional value. They feel “full” so they go and rest and eventually they become habitual beggars, subsisting on handouts and forgetting to eat their natural food. After all, that is way more work to find! Another complicating factor is that the habitat becomes overcrowded and there actually may not be any natural food left. Yet the birds that can’t fly can only go as far as they can walk. Stale bread from an occasional visitor may be their only meal.

Helping Domestic Ducks and Geese

If you live in a community that has an area where domestic ducks and geese have been abandoned alert your local media to this issue and ask that they do stories to educate the public. At some point, every small lake and pond, just like the Venice Canals, will become overpopulated. After all, ducks can hatch 14 or more eggs and you can see how 15 ducks can quickly become one hundred. Ask your local pet shop to not sell “Easter” bunnies, ducklings and chicks out of respect for the environment, the animals, and all the non-profit organizations and local shelters that will end up having to care for them.

When you see flocks of abandoned geese and ducks, remember they are not living the good life. A story in your local paper might be a way to begin placing them into good homes. Ask your local parks department if they can put up signs, educating people not to abandon animals and that feeding them only makes matters worse. If you would like to adopt ducks, geese or both (being flock animals they do not do well alone) contact your local shelter and animal control and tell them to alert you should they ever need to place birds.

To learn more about pet ducks and domestics visit www.liveducks.com

To identify domestic ducks and geese visit www.feathersite.com/

For information about Canada geese, visit www.geesepeace.org.

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