

CALL DUCKS À LA MODE

by Mike Ashton



Brown Mallard Drake alongside Blue-fawn and Apricot for comparison.

Clothing, music, furniture, art, decoration, housing—fashions come and go—but why? Why do people want things that they never had, or never wanted, before? What are the ‘trigger points’ that cause some things to become fashionable?

(1) They have to be available. (2) Other people have got to have them. (3) They have to be perceived as being socially desirable. Whether we actually NEED them or not is another kettle of red herrings!

I can remember going to a poultry show in the early 1980s in Whitchurch Town Hall (in Shropshire). There were two, just two, little Call ducks in pens amongst cages and cages of chickens, geese and other ducks. These two minute birds stood out, not just because they were unusual and very cute, but because they looked totally lost in such huge pens at the side by the wall—lost and isolated. Go to any poultry show nowadays and the raucous noise of Call ducks can be quite over-powering. They fill the hall. This single breed of duck can now take over as much as 30% of all the waterfowl entries.

In those days, the early 1980s, Call Ducks had only just been accepted for the *British Poultry Standards* and I can remember buying a copy of a special edition of these published by Butterworths ‘in association with The British Waterfowl Association’, entitled *British Waterfowl Standards*. This was a little brown pamphlet containing the first real modifications to the written Standards of the Call Duck since 1865*. Amazing! And they did not even call it the ‘Call Duck’. Its title was the ‘Decoy’. Only five colour varieties were mentioned, which seems a bit parsimonious now, with so many different colour forms available; but in 1982 this much variety was revolutionary. The original Standard of 1865 had only two (the

White and the Grey). The 1982 booklet was to herald (or at least accompany) the great resurgence in popularity of the decoy duck. The ‘new’ colours included ‘Pied’, ‘Blue-fawn’ and ‘Silver’. The innovations became very fashionable indeed, especially with the ‘Apricot’ that followed almost immediately, so much so that the original (mallard or Rouen coloured) variety was quickly pushed into the background. In a case a bit like that of the Chinese goose, people could not make up their minds whether to call it the ‘Grey’ Call or the ‘Brown’ Call (as it was labelled in the 1982 Standards). Still, Mallard Calls have retained a limited but loyal following amongst those breeders who specialize in birds of the best shape, or those who are canny enough to realize that the Mallard is a vital ingredient in intelligent colour breeding. It can be used to refresh the gene pool of both Apricot and Blue Mallard (Blue-fawn) Calls without causing unnecessary complications!

The question, however, is still: why were there no Standards at all for over a hundred years? Was no-one interested in keeping these little birds? What has changed?

By 1853, when Rev W Wingfield and G W Johnson Esq published their edition of *The Poultry Book*, Britain was changing, fast. The industrial and agrarian revolutions of the previous century had left indelible marks on the towns and countryside alike. Ducks and geese were no longer just locally caught from the wild or grown on farms and small-holdings. Specialist producers were breeding and transporting such birds in their thousands. Alison Ambrose’s marvellous little pamphlet, published in 1991 by the Buckinghamshire County Museum, documents the growth of the Aylesbury Duck phenomenon. Industrial scale production was beginning to make itself felt. The old ways of life were disappearing. Wingfield and Johnson

reported that: 'The days of the decoys are fast passing away in this country, the improved cultivation of the fenny districts of England interfering both with the food and privacy required for them. We need not, therefore, dwell on the reeds, pipes, nets, and dogs of the fowler, which have furnished such abundant matter for previous writers on aquatic birds. One only of his devices and companions comes within our limits, and that is the garrulous little Call Duck, which also occasionally passes under the name of the *"Italian Wild Duck."*'"

Well, I'm blown! Italian suits, Italian shoes, Italian opera, Italian food, Italian coffee—now Italian ducks! Is it all a matter of fashion?

Not really. Wingfield and Johnson were documenting a real change. By 1845, the big producers were running 'live' poultry shows for the first time. The fashions amongst ducks were for the 'big' meat birds, the Aylesbury and its wild-colour equivalent, the Rouen. In geese, the huge foreign Embdens and Toulouse were also having an impact. These were to be the fashions of the meat industry and the showing fraternity for the next hundred years—and fashion was a motivating factor, not just for practical reasons alone. I believe that Queen Victoria's own interest in the newly imported Cochin or Shanghai fowl proved an important role-model in the very early shows. Other exotic varieties of fowl and other species were reaching these shores, and they were gaining in popularity amongst the rich and socially conscious.

Then came the 'boom', as they called it, for Indian Runner Ducks. This happened around 1890 and echoed over the next thirty or forty years. Egg-layers replaced meat producers in popularity. It was possible for working-class people too to make a living from duck keeping. With cheap sources of grain and ducks that could lay between 200 and 300 eggs a year, a veritable cottage industry grew up, especially in those days before battery chickens cornered the market. But it was 'fashionable'. Just look at the poultry journals in the early twentieth century and you realize how much everyone wanted to get in on the act.

At that time, of course, people like William Cook and Mrs Campbell were gaining huge kudos from crossing Indian Runners with other, heavier breeds. Hybrid vigour (heterosis), and Indian Runner egg-laying characteristics, dominated the new breeds from the Orpingtons (1898), the Campbells, the Abacot Ranger through to the Welsh Harlequin (1949). These were practical birds for practical people. Even Mrs Campbell resisted attempts to write a comprehensive Standard for her Khaki Campbell. When this bird was introduced around 1901 she considered it a utility breed and did not wish to see show-breeding spoil its egg-laying priority. It was not until 1930 that the show fancy got its way, and there developed a tendency for two distinct varieties of Khaki Campbell, the relatively large and dark feathered show variety and the smaller, lighter egg layer. Indian Runners went the same way: tall, thin, perpendicular show specimens and more utility egg-layers.

And what happened to the Call duck at this time? Sad though it may seem, the little duck was all but left out in the cold. It was 'relegated'

Yellow Belly Female



Brown Mallard Duckling



Young Silver Call female, the Call equivalent of the Abacot Ranger



from the 'domestic' category to the 'ornamental duck' category in most text books and exhibitions. Perhaps we should not be too snooty about this. Call ducks are hardly 'utility' birds; they lay few eggs and have even less usable meat than a wild mallard. Even now, most people keep them as pets, show specimens or garden 'ornaments'. In the first half of the twentieth century they were actually shown alongside Mandarin, Carolina, Teal and other exotic wild-fowl. In most 'collections' of waterfowl, often by the well-off and socially competitive classes, these little birds would be collected with all sorts of imported creatures, from pea fowl to pelicans, from shelducks to shovelers. It was quite a comfortable liaison amongst the high status exotics. They were 'fashionable', but in a quite different way. In the twenty-first century things have changed radically. Call Ducks are now fashionable for completely different reasons. Few people can breed ducks for eggs or meat. Industrial production has all but seen off the competition, except in the niche markets of free-range or organic products. Few people can afford large 'collections'. Land is expensive, so much so that goose keeping is witnessing a sharp decline. Farm ducks are a rarity; garden ducks are in vogue.

Let's face it: it is so much easier (and cheaper) to keep half a dozen Calls in the back garden than a blundering troupe of Aylesburies or Rouens, which cost a fortune to feed, are slow to rear, and who wants to pay the going rate for exhibition quality big ducks? Who wants a thousand eggs a year from a small flock of Campbells? The drakes are rapacious and the eggs a blessed nuisance to pick up, clean and sell, especially if you have jobs during the week.

No, Calls are very practical. But you still have the thrill of the exhibition circuit, for which, again, they are very practical. We show large African Geese, and I can promise you that carrying, cleaning and caging these is a darned sight harder than Call Ducks. Keep those on the pond, sponge them off and put them in little cages. What could be easier?

So where does the fashion thing come in? Well, if everyone else is getting a buzz out of small ducks, it makes sense to join in. That's fashion! On top of that, there is the mania for new colours. It is most amusing to hear and see fanciers chasing after the latest 'fashion' in duck plumage. It doesn't do much harm and it gives endless pleasure to those who

want to breed ducks à la mode. Why not get in on the act?

Look on the website www.callducks.net or contact the Secretary of the Call Duck Association on **01558 650532**.

**The 1971 British Poultry Standards printed a 'Decoy' Standard but, like the 1865 edition, described only the 'White Variety' and the 'Brown Variety: Plumage of both sexes resembles the same colour as the Mallard.'*

(All photographs copyright Chris Ashton)



Brown Silver Drake

Yellow Bellies at Graham and Sandra Barnard's

