

The Care and Husbandry of Waterfowl

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Species Descriptions

The current avicultural climate is an uncertain one. There are many changes occurring that influence our choices in avicultural subjects - council regulations, wildlife department regulations, market fluctuations. Many of these changes have led to aviculturists looking elsewhere for ways of releasing their avian urges.

The keeping of native and exotic waterfowl by bird keepers is currently increasing and provides a different yet challenging outlet. What do waterfowl have to offer? This article will briefly outline some basic husbandry techniques that may open this group of birds up to experienced and beginners alike. I will concentrate on a few species that I feel are within the abilities of all aviculturists and look at the many and varied ways that they may be maintained in the average avicultural collection.

Dietary Requirements

The bulk of the waterfowl that I will outline in this article are essentially granivorous. This means that from a dietary perspective, they may be no more difficult to feed than the average parrot and in many cases are far easier to care for.

Waterfowl are essentially seasonal in their breeding and the utilisation of maintenance and breeding diets can be useful. In some states, proprietary waterfowl maintenance and breeder diets are available. These certainly take the guesswork out of feeding the more basic species. In the majority of states, feed companies rarely justify demand to produce waterfowl diets and we must therefore borrow from other species. In a non-breeding period, these species may be readily maintained on a diet of mixed grains. Mixes such as 50% budgerigar mix with 50% coarse laying mash can be used. If a dry seed mix alone is to be used it should be supplemented with some greenfeed even in the maintenance period. I tend to choose the mixed maintenance diet as I feel it helps with the additional stresses of post and pre breeding moults without providing so much energy as to encourage deposition of fat. This is obviously also going to be controlled by enclosure size and subsequent activity. Birds in small enclosures may have minimal energy use and can therefore be maintained on a very spartan non breeding diet. Breeding diets are essential diets with higher protein contents.

For the species detailed in this article, Coarse Laying Mash or Pullet Grower crumbles are suitable as a base diet. Never exceed 21% in your base diet (e.g. Turkey grower crumbles) as excessive protein supply may be detrimental to the health of some water fowl (i.e. grazing species such as Australian Shelduck or Cape Barren geese). In a mixed situation it is better to feed a lower fixed protein diet and supplement individually for those with greater needs. Some of the species are significantly reliant on grazing as a greater part of their diet. It is not difficult in the smaller species to maintain planted enclosures that supply adequate grazing but if this is unavailable then greenfeed

supplements such as lawn clippings, soaked and drained lucerne chaff and green leafy vegetable such as endives can be used. If the enclosure is planted with lawn, the birds definitely prefer it if it is regularly mowed.

Supplements of locally available water weeds can be significant in stimulating breeding and may be stored in small plastic ponds or may be frozen in portions for later used. If using water weed fresh be aware that small aquatic organisms living within the weed may harbor intermediate stages of parasites such as tapeworms and regular worming may be needed (I use Vetafarm Wormout Tablets).

Livefoods such as fly pupa and termites are readily taken by some species and are best fed floated on the water surface.

Housing

Housing is always considered to be the major stumbling block for the keeping of waterfowl. The common belief that you cannot keep waterfowl without a large dam is now proving to be very wrong; in fact some species are breeding better with the use of smaller enclosures. If you are lucky enough to live in a situation where a natural water body is available then all of these species are suitable as long as you address things such as predation and suitable fencing.

I will deal mainly with those other options that may be used by the backyard birdo.

Keeping waterfowl in aviaries is a relatively new option from the Australian perspective. 10 years ago it was not encouraged and few practised this means of keeping. Many people missed out on the joys of waterfowl due to this.

The basic waterfowl aviary must provide the following things:

1. a clean source of water capable of accommodating a pair of mating birds
2. a non abrasive floor
3. suitable shelter and nest sites
4. predator protection

How these features are provided is dependent on the individual species to be kept and your available facilities. Generally if you wish to keep waterfowl in an aviary they should be restricted to 1 pair per enclosure of preferably 10 square metres. Planted aviaries are ideal and waterfowl suitable for aviary life are generally not that destructive. Water facilities need to be cleaned as often as possible but for the aviculturist that is forced to go to work each day this may only be once weekly. In an aviary, the water facility may be

a simple concrete or fibreglass pond that can readily be emptied and cleaned. Cleanliness is important to reduce smells and flies, two things that will upset your neighbours with little effort. Floor material should ideally be natural, relatively soft and free draining. Natural grass provides this easily but is not always available. Sand floors are sufficient for species that would naturally spend time walking a lot but can be abrasive to aquatic species such as Scaup and Water Whistlers. Abrasive surfaces can be covered with other materials such as lawn clippings or soft sawdust but this needs to be kept dry and replaced regularly to prevent mould buildup. Aviaries generally provide the most efficient predator protection and are recommended for rarer species on this basis. The humble backyard is perhaps the most overlooked form of housing. A fully fenced yard with lush gardens and ample lawn may be just what the doctor ordered for a couple of pair of native waterfowl. Neighbourhood cats can be a problem and night pens or simply covering part of the yard may be used. If you choose to use night pens, make them easy to access and make sure the door opening flows along a fenceline or forms the corner of the yard as waterfowl are difficult to round up and push through a door opening if the instructions are anything but basic. If locking up the birds at night is causing stress, it is better not to do it. Aviary walkways of your main aviary block or a pen under your suspendeds may be a simple night lockup option. Covering parts of your yard with barely visible soft netting such as hail mesh, anti bird net or bat net may allow you to section off a large area for your waterfowl whilst also providing aerial protection for the rest of your aviaries from things like hawks and butcherbirds. At the very least, this excuse seems to work well for me. In many circumstances, these waterfowl species will become tolerant of other pets such as your own dog and cat. If you consider it safe enough to allow chooks to run loose then you may have a suitable setup. If using your yard as an enclosure, be aware that these birds are streamlined and small and can squeeze through small gaps if they feel the need to.

The Species

The species following represent those birds that I have personally kept in a backyard situation either free range or in aviaries. These are not necessarily all of the cheap and nasty birds. In fact this selection includes those species which are amongst the most appealing. I will briefly cover mainly the housing and breeding needs of these species as feeding is fairly similar for all of these.

CHESTNUT AND GREY TEAL

Perhaps the least expensive varieties of native waterfowl, they are also amongst the prettiest. Chestnut Teal are readily available and are suitable for all housing types. Grey Teal may be a little more timid and are less suitable for small aviaries. Both species relish water weed supplements and require water containers for part of their normal day to day activity. They breed readily in captivity, selecting long grass or thick vegetation, hollow logs (1 m long and 30cm diameter) and nest boxes (e.g. 40 cm x 30cm x 30 cm with a 10-15cm hole 10 cm from the top) for breeding. Breeding season is usually from July to March.

GRASS WHISTLER DUCK

The Grass Whistler is a primarily terrestrial duck with little need for water containers except for bathing and mating. They are a grazing species. They can be a little belligerent at times and are often best housed on their own. They are suitable for all forms of housing but need greenfood supplementation if housed in aviaries. In a backyard situation, they are most endearing. Their downside (maybe) is that they are called whistling ducks because that is what they do best. They will often vocalise with a series of high pitched whistles at night and this may upset your sensitive (ignorant) neighbours. Grassies generally prefer to nest in thick vegetation but may occasionally use a log site under deep cover. Most breeding occurs September to March and it is strongly stimulated by rain. This species is perhaps the most stubborn species to round up into a pen at night and will often test your patience to the limit. They are however the most forgiving species and cope relatively well once they get used to a routine.

WATER WHISTLER DUCK

The Water Whistler, as its name suggests is strongly bound to water. I have however maintained and bred this species prolifically in an aviary situation with a single fibreglass pond. They are an excellent backyard species but tend to be a little shy initially and are very unforgiving of stress. They are best housed in such a way that you do not need to disturb them excessively. They are vocal like the Grassies but their call is not as loud or high pitched. They will prefer to nest in heavy vegetation but I have had pairs regularly use logs or milk drums as nest sites. This species has relatively sensitive feet and abrasive floor surfaces should be avoided. Breeding season is much the same as the Grassies. If stressed, this species will often have problems with temporary infertility following these stressful periods. Water whistlers adore aquatic weeds and are partial to livefood which may act as an important breeding stimulus.

AUSTRALIAN WOOD DUCK

Wood ducks are more terrestrial than Grassies and require water facilities mainly for drinking and mating. They graze extensively and should have access to lawn to see them at their best. They will cope with unplanted enclosures if daily greenfood is provided. They are confident and tame and will often feed from the owners hands once tamed. This species is excellent for backyard setups as ponds are not needed and nesting facilities may be provided in the form of nestboxes or logs. Breeding occurs mainly September to March.

NEW ZEALAND SCAUP

Scaup are a less commonly available species suited mainly to aviary or covered yard housing. In an open backyard situation, Scaup are escape prone and "hawk magnets". Their small bathtub duck form makes them ideal for small planted aviaries where most of their time is spent on or near water. As with Water Whistlers, their feet are sensitive to abrasive surfaces. Being a cold climate bird they do need protection from hot weather and ample vegetation provides this. They are prone to obesity and fatty liver problems if overfed in the non breeding season. They breed moderately well and will accept dense

vegetation, logs or boxes. As they tend to breed July to March, make sure nest sites are well shaded as they can rapidly overheat in a hot nest box or log.

MANDARIN DUCK

Undoubtedly the most attractive duck species available, the Mandarin is ideally suited to the backyard situation. Owing to their high price they are best housed with ample protection as they too fit into the "hawk magnet" category. Despite their price (which is high mainly due to previously low numbers), Mandarins are relatively easy to keep and breed. They will accept mainly nest boxes and logs and best breeding results are obtained if these are raised so that they do not hold moisture in inclement weather. These birds appreciate perching facilities and like to be above whatever is going on. They can at times be a little cranky but are otherwise suited to mixed collections.

OTHER OPTIONS

If your yard is that little bit bigger, and your neighbours a little more tolerant than Cape Barren Geese and Australian shelducks are worth a look. Cape Barrens are the only species that needs water only for drinking. They do make all the usual geese noises as well as a pig-like grunt in the female. They are grazers and perhaps their most unfortunate habit is their ability to seemingly produce their own body weight in faeces per day and usually on the back door mat. This aside, they are pleasant in the non-breeding season and better than any dog in the breeding season. They are winter breeders (May - July) and will make their own mound of grass as a nest site. They are a formidable weapon at this time and small children and careless adults should beware as they do pack a mighty punch.

Australian shelducks are dependent partly on water but are still primarily a grazing species. They are also a winter breeder and use mainly large nestboxes or logs. Their downside is mainly their breeding vocalisations. Their loving duets may not appeal to all people.

Waterfowl are an avicultural option that deserves more intense interest. Local council regulations may be a problem in some areas but as these birds are controlled by native and exotic licencing systems for ornamental species they cannot therefore truly be considered under the category of poultry. They may be just the answer for that quiet corner of the yard or that vacant aviary floor. Give them a try and you will be pleasantly surprised.