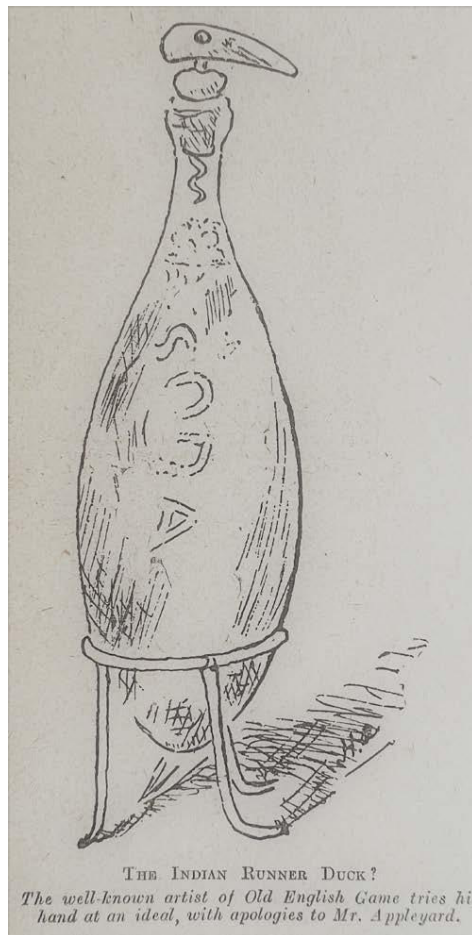


Runner ducks are all the rage - but they aren't the ideal garden duck

Chris Ashton looks into their needs and natural behaviour



A bowling pin on legs – or even a soda water bottle. That's the way Indian Runners have

been described in the past. These upright birds are built for ranging and foraging in the paddy fields of South-

east Asia (not India). They certainly aren't built for living in a confined area or 'run'. If space is limited, then please don't hatch or buy them; get something more suited to a small space, such as Call ducks. Runners are great for a farm or large garden (as long as it's fox-free) for slug foraging and egg-production, but they are not at home in the confined space of a chicken-sized run.

TOP OF TODAY'S POPS

Runners seem to have a certain cachet at the moment. There is more awareness of the pure, standardized Runner colours such as the glossy marked Blacks, and strikingly marked Fawn-&whites. However, many hatching eggs sold as pure Runners are actually from mixed flocks because it's simply easier and cheaper to look after them in just one group instead of individually-penned pedigree pairs.

Runners are much easier to hatch than tiny Call ducks and other pure breeds (such as Buff Orpingtons and Cayugas) because the mixing up the Runner colours creates genetic diversity which increases hatchability even for the novice. A good Brinsea incubator, used according to the instructions, can produce very respectable results from such hatching eggs, even when very little is known by the operator about the development of the egg during the incubation process.

However, these easy-to-hatch, mixed Runner colours will produce mongrel offspring. Such conditions will not produce the exhibition Runners, where a great deal of care is taken in the selection of physically fit birds. Specialist breeders keep pure-colour groups of Runners in separated areas, each group with its individual housing. They may also resort to recorded



Mixed colour Runners bred from Trout crossed with Fawn& Whites (pied). Any offspring from these will be even more variable.

PICTURE CREDIT: WWW.SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Silver (harlequin) Runners came from Germany and have been further developed in the UK. They have often been spoiled by crossing them with other colours such as Trout and the non-standardized 'Appleyard'.

breeding programmes over two or three generations to select unrelated, pure-colour breeder birds from compatible colour-crosses; or import birds from other enthusiasts in Europe. A good deal of expense goes in to breeding pure, top-quality birds. If exhibition Runners are sought, then please seek out the experts rather than rely on Ebay eggs.

SHOULD I GET DUCKLINGS?

Ducklings are adorable, aren't they? In the first week they are fluffy, tiny and tame. Handling them is good for them, but this entertainment won't last for long. All ducklings have a huge demand for water and food – they eat far more in the first few weeks than chicks. This means that they grow really fast and as a consequence are very smelly and messy; a box in the house with 'puppy pads' is not a fit place for them.

Unless there is a dedicated safe space for rearing them (free from mice, rats and larger predators), with a heat source to keep them warm, then looking after them can be a problem. You do need to invest in decent rearing equipment such as a heat plate, a raised floor to collect spilled water from the drinker, and specialist bedding and duck food.

The ingredients and grade of food change as the birds grow: from starter crumbs, to growers pellets and then layers pellets for the females as the birds mature. The timing of these changes of food is different from chicks. So, please find out about their requirements for food and water, warmth from a brooder, and bedding before committing to hatching.

As well as these basic rearing requirements, Runners especially need sunlight and exercise for their development. Runners become too fat and

over-fed when confined; they must use their legs to grow into healthy birds. Overfeeding, poor-quality food and lack of exercise will all result in heavy quills because the flight feathers grow too rapidly. These birds will have poor mobility from weak legs if they don't exercise, and a vitamin B supplement is also recommended during the first few weeks because ducks grow so fast.

SEX AND SENSIBILITY – ONE MALE ONLY

One Runner drake in a mixed sex group is desirable. More than one can be a disaster because females will be over-mated by sex-pests and even die of injuries from male aggression. So, if you are hatching Runner eggs, or buying ducklings, do consider what will happen to the males; or indeed what has happened to the males if females-only are offered for sale. Small numbers of only males are usually peaceful.

General demand is of course for females for eggs. But, in most hatches, there can be more males than females. There isn't a market for these. Occasionally, two drakes can be re-homed as garden slug-foragers. If you hatch your own

birds, then be prepared to find homes for (or cull) surplus males. Don't let them become some unsuspecting person's management problem.

TELLING THE SEX

Sexing ducks is easy to the experienced eye. They can be vent-sexed in the first week by an experienced person. Coloured birds are showing differences in feather pattern and colour even at five weeks, and it's around that time that the voice will start to break into a definite 'quack' – or remain as a male 'peep' or whistle during this juvenile stage. It is surprising that people don't notice the difference, but you do have to separate the individuals to hear what is going on.

WHERE TO GET GOOD ADVICE ON KEEPING RUNNERS

Facebook pages (there are several Indian Runner Duck pages) are very useful for picking up advice but be aware that some of the answers regarding incubation, hatching, sexing and feeding may not be based on much practical experience. Also, people may be based in the southern hemisphere (a different hatching season from the UK); others are located in the USA



There are no initial colour differences between males and females in Black Runners (or white Runners). Solid Black Runners are also particularly difficult to breed because a first cross of a black with another colour generally looks 'black' to the inexperienced eye. These impure birds will breed a variety of colours and patterns.

Photo: James Rigby



Blue Dusky growers enjoying the outdoors

and can use different terms and brands of food.

Be aware that eggs hatched in season are the best ones to have. Ducks naturally breed in spring, so hatch your birds in spring. There are good reasons for this. Don't be inveigled into hatching autumn eggs. These are good to extend the vendors' selling season, as indeed are early eggs. But the timing is not good for you or the ducklings. Choose a hatching time when the weather is warm to get the growers outdoors at around 4 weeks of age.

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOUR IS KEY TO A CONTENTED FLOCK

The big attraction of hatching eggs is that hand-reared

Runners are much easier to handle than adult birds which have not received a great deal of attention over their upbringing – these really can be quite wild. As a result, moving Runners to a new home can be a problem; they need to be securely fenced in. Their big advantage is that they cannot fly, but they are adept at running up a metre fence and will go straight through holes in wire with a coarse mesh.

Well-handled birds may not be as tame when they are adult but at least they will come running for food, and not treat you as a potential threat. Again, if you want tame birds, then it's far better to go for Call ducks or even a heavy Rouen where the pace of life is more measured.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR GETTING RUNNERS

- Do not get these birds on a whim. There is quite a lot to learn about hatching and feeding at the different stages of life.
- Females generally live to five years of age, males quite a lot longer – they have a less stressful life.
- The birds may become ill – some vets will charge as much for your duck as a cat or dog.
- Be prepared to find out about treatments for minor ailments, such as eye infections, parasitic worms and body mites.
- Their feet are a problem – these ducks evolved in paddy fields or on water. Hard surfaces cause calluses and even infections caused by broken skin.
- Avian influenza has not gone away despite fading back a bit in spring. We do not know how it will behave over the next 2023-2024 flu season.
- And please do realise that if you keep birds – any outdoor birds – then Defra expects you to keep them under cover (protected from wild bird disease transmission) at certain times of the year. This is a trial for waterfowl, so it's best to keep only a few ducks to give them the best conditions possible - and to avoid too much work.



Perfect Black Runners like these only come with selective breeding

For many, the attraction of the Runner really is the way they move. They are beautiful in a flock, will come to call for their feed, and are better layers than most other breeds of ducks - excepting the Campbell/ Abacot Ranger / Welsh Harlequin clan.

Runners have been my favourite for many years because of their flock behaviour; also because of breeding for colour genetics where the exhibition colours are pretty much standardized

internationally. So, it really is a pity that people still continue to muddle the colours up!

REFERENCES

- Indian Runner Duck Club Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/iprofile.php?id=100064939770522>
- Keeping Ducks and Geese – Chris & Mike Ashton – published by David & Charles
- For examples of pure colours and their descriptions, see the website www.runnerduck.net.



James Rigby Fawn and White Indian Runners