

Waterfowl in Canberra 2008

by Mike and Chris Ashton

Every four years, to coincide with the Olympic Games, Canberra hosts a big poultry exhibition. Between 5000-6000 exhibits is not exactly small by any standards but the distances covered by the exhibitors and visitors is massive. Just imagine travelling from London to the middle of Kazakhstan. That's roughly what it would be like going from Perth or Darwin to the capital city. Even relative locals down in Melbourne have some four hundred miles of driving. Taking into account the population of Australia, which is only a third of that of Great Britain, and the fact that only a tiny fraction of the land area, mainly around the coasts, is suitable for waterfowl at least, it is amazing how such a show could be put on. So, every credit should go to Geoff Cannock and Rod Compton, Chief Executive and President respectively of the Royal National Capital Agricultural Society.

Chris and I were honoured to be invited to judge the geese. A mysterious telephone call from Harry Cooper, Australia's popular TV vet, set us on our way. 'Dr Harry' is a great character, larger than life and bubbling with energy. Sitting in a restaurant with him, you can hear little kids whispering to their parents, 'That's Dr Harry!' in tones of awe and astonishment, followed by numerous requests for autographs or photographs with the celebrity. It was unusual to bask at the edge of the spot-light of celebrity.

Judging the geese and giving two recorded talks on waterfowl left little time for looking at many of the other feathered exhibits, but it was very pleasing to note the quality of the birds and the enthusiasm of the fanciers. Last month Fancy Fowl published photographs of 'Winning Silkies'. I must confess to being surprised by the auction prices. Over £300 is a lot to pay for a single hen. I hope that degree of commitment heralds a sign of even more enthusiasm to come. The waterfowl too were much better than expected.

One innovation they warned us to expect was 'micro-phoned judging'! We were wired up to radio mikes and the remarks were broadcast over the loud-speakers. Terrifying as it sounds, it allowed the judges to comment on each exhibit and explain the reasons for the decisions. One advantage of having two judges working together meant that there could be a live debate and a dynamic consensus. And husband-and-wife teams do not always agree—but that makes more dramatic presentation, to say the least! Fortunately it was only the 'pom' judges that had to try out this innovation; imagine a hall full of judges talking across one another! At least the exhibitors had the chance to get their revenge when we had finished. There were two one-hour slots where we gave presentations on geese and ducks using computer-operated projectors. After each 'talk' we invited members of the audience to ask questions. This was filmed by a professional crew and used for a special DVD. The questions were great. The Aussies were particularly interested in our perceptions of their birds.

Dr Hamish Russell, the new President of the Victoria Waterfowl Association, had warned in us in advance not to expect some of the breeds to be on a par with those of Europe and America. Australia has restricted importation of new blood lines for many years. Fear of ecological contamination and infectious diseases has meant that the Australians have had to develop stock brought over in previous centuries. They have none of the new 'dwarf' Call Ducks produced in Holland and only a small range of light ducks imported early in the last century (Khaki Campbells, Buff Orpingtons, Cresteds and Welsh Harlequins). As a result, The Australians have specialized in breeding coloured varieties of 'Mallard', which is an imported species down there and not welcomed as a wild or feral addition to the native Australian species. There is also a Call fancy, which is suspended precariously between the Mallards and what we perceive as being the exhibition Call of the Northern hemisphere. I wonder how long it will be before someone imports (legally or not) some of the dwarf bloodlines and revolutionizes the Australian fancy.

One thing the Australians have done is to go it alone on one or two of their own specialist breeds. The Elizabeth and the Watervale Ducks are home-grown varieties both now included in the Australian Standards. We had little chance to study the Watervales, which looked as if they had elements of light or harlequin phase genes alongside modifier genes inherited from Cayugas. The 'Lizzies', as they are known affectionately, are more clearly harlequin phase, similar in plumage in many ways to Abacot Rangers, Silver Bantams and Silver Runners. The males have extensive claret markings washing along the flanks; the secondary coverts (next to the speculum) are rimmed like the Abacot Ranger's; the neck ring goes all the way round; the scapulars are marked in a tortoise-shell pattern, like that of a Welsh Harlequin; whilst the bill is a dark green slate colour somewhat like the Khaki Campbell. The ducks are beautiful little things: very similar to some of the browner Welsh Harlequins though only about two-thirds of the weight, and with blue-green specula rather than bronze. These were developed by Lance J. Ruting in 1972, from farm-yard ducks with a passing resemblance to Rouen Clairs, to be small, quick-growing meat birds. They are extremely pretty, healthy-looking, and economical pet or exhibition ducks.

A word of warning to those breeders of Muscovy Ducks: if you think some of the birds in Britain have become a little on the small side you should see those from Queensland. They are so big that only the females have retained the ability to fly. They are massive!

I must confess I liked the look of some of the Rouens. We visited the farms of Michael and Kathy Holmes and also Geoff and Murray Akers. Michael's Rouens looked very good indeed and I was most taken by Geoff's Fawn-&-white Runners. The ones running around the yard were extremely well marked without

even the benefit of the 'barber's shop' as one sometimes finds in British shows.

What was most amazing, I am afraid, is the sheer number of 'auto-sexing' geese in Australia. They are not even thought of as anything special. Whilst the Aussies are 'busting a gut' to breed Chinese, Africans and Toulouse as good as ours, they have on their own doorsteps one of the most specialized breeds in the world, one which the Americans tend to claim for their own and envied by the British—the 'Pilgrim' Goose! They have had them there for years, long before Oscar Grow drew attention to them after the 1930s. They probably came over with the European immigrants as just 'Common geese', with the inherent ability to breed grey females and white males. Some Australians call them 'Settler Geese' and I think they have a good case for standardizing them as such. The Pilgrims shown at Canberra by Trevor Hunt and Dr Harry were excellent birds, clearly worthy of section winners at any British show.

Champion goose/gander just had to go to a beautiful Embden gander owned by Graham Webb. It was tall, heavy and with the type of head similar to those favoured by Cornish breeders—a worthy winner. Other birds that took our attention were the Sebastopol again owned by Dr Harry, the Africans of Warren Schutz and the Chinese of Michael Peel. Later we managed to visit Warren in Northern Victoria and renew a friendship developed years earlier through the Indian Runner Duck Association. Warren is a delightful character, intelligent, full of life and eager to talk and listen on all topics of waterfowl. A trained botanist, he picked up on the genetics and was deeply interested in breeding.

Michael Peel's farm near Sydney was a set-up to be jealous of. He has flattish land, a good supply of water, well-drained, silty soil and an abundance of grass. This was their winter (in June) and I still have nightmares about our own abundance of mud and clay. Michael has some cracking Sebastopol (much to the delight of Conchita). These are her birds, whilst he takes equal delight in some very promising Chinese and Toulouse. Having had considerable expertise in rearing ostriches, Angora goats and greyhounds, Michael has well thought out facilities. He uses paddocks and corridors to maximum efficiency, diverting young stock on to fresh pasture and keeping a clean and healthy environment. We were lucky indeed to enjoy the enthusiasm and warm hospitality of Warren and Michael.

Last, but certainly not least, our praise should go to Hamish and his colleagues in the Victoria Waterfowl Association. They are, I believe, the biggest waterfowl club in Australia and have long communicated with the British Waterfowl Association, sharing rosettes and awards. Meeting their new secretary, Tim Drewitt, and the editor of Australasian Poultry magazine, Megg Miller, was a great delight. Our sincere thanks for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Tim Drewett's Tufted



Warren's African



Michael Holmes' Lizzies

