

INDIAN RUNNER COLOURS

by Chris Ashton

The original Indian Runner Duck varieties, reported by John Donald in the nineteenth century, were White, Fawn and pied (Fawn-&White and also Grey-&-White). White is a common mutation in birds (white blackbirds, white Aylesbury ducks, etc.) whereby no coloured pigment is produced on the feathers. Fawn and pied varieties, on the other hand, are special. They seem to have evolved in the Runner. Wherever a similar colour crops up in other breeds, it is always subsequent to Runner connections. It is almost certain that these Runner colour genes came from the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia. Runners do not come from India. Where the other Runner duck colours come from – for example the black, blue and silver genes – is less certain, but they are certainly in Runners today.

Fawn Runners

Just as the Mallard Call is the archetypal Call duck, so the Fawn is the definitive Runner. The best imports of the Fawn Runners (from Lombok, Bali and Java in the early twentieth century [1]) were all typical of the modern Fawn, the original colour of the breed. That is why the 2008 BWA Waterfowl Standards have devoted good photo coverage to this colour of this breed.

The light phase Fawn is still unique to the Runner. It combines the brown gene with the dusky gene and light phase. Breeds such as the Khaki Campbell and Buff Orpington are similar but dark phase. Together, these genes make the birds look brown, and literally a bit lighter than the 'dark phase' which is allelic to the 'light phase'. The Fawn Runner is also 'dusky' which means it does not have the stripes one sees on the head of the wild female mallard; instead the head is plain. The underwings are coloured rather than white.

The Runners imported by Joseph Walton in 1909 were dusky but, for a while in the UK, Fawn Runners often had eyestripes, probably acquired from crossing them with farmyard ducks. By the 1920s breeders were aware of this impurity and plumped for birds with no sign of the eyestripes. The dusky gene that gets rid of eyestripes probably came with the Runners in the first place from the Far East.

This dusky gene, together with the brown gene, also opened up the possibility of more duck breeds and colours, and of course 'made' some of the most popular breeds of ducks we see today. The Buff Orpington and Khaki Campbell both owe their brown and dusky genes to the Runner. And of course all the other 'light' breeds of ducks probably have a bit of Runner in their background too.

Black, Chocolate and Blue

Nobody knows for certain where the black gene evolved. Historically it is associated with the Black East Indian duck. This breed was recorded here in



Young Cumberland Blue Runner females. These birds are heterozygous for blue in the presence of black. Blues will also breed a proportion of Blacks (not blue) and splashed or Lavender (homozygous blue with black). More info in 'Colour Breeding in Domestic Ducks' by Ashton & Ashton

the UK at the farm of the Zoological Society as the 'Buenos Ayres' duck in 1831 [2]. Whatever the truth about its origin, the black gene was used in Runners after 1909, and Black was standardized in 1930. At the same time, of course, it was possible to produce the Chocolate which, in ducks, is brown plus black. The brown gene on its own does not count as Chocolate. The Cumberland Blue, also with the black gene, but heterozygous for blue, had to wait until 1980 for a standard.

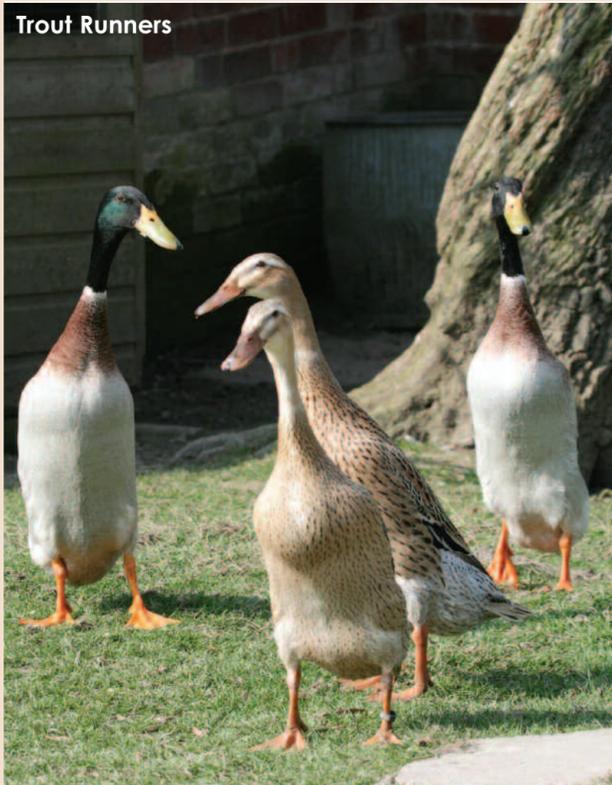
The blue gene itself is enigmatic. It crops up in European ducks (Pommern, Blue Swedish), but did the blue gene arrive with the Runner too? Harrison Weir describes 'Penguin ducks' (an early alternative name for the Runner) from 1858: 'Some are extremely pretty, being of a dull blue, light brown, blue black, and splashed freely with white.'

Evidence also suggests that the blue dilution was in Pied Runners in America. In the 1912 version of Lewis Wright, Walton comments on the 'American fad regarding the plumage of the duck. They fancied a drab or very pale fawn feathering in the coloured portions of the plumage of the females and the feathers to be quite plain without either lacing or pencilling.' He seems to be describing a buff duck with brown and blue genes, for that colour gene takes away the pencilling of the pure Fawn. If the blue gene has been around in the American

Fawn & White Runners



Trout Runners



Runners for a long time, it also explains why the American Fawn-&-whites are so different from the UK Fawn-&-whites which are pencilled. The difference, of course, is the blue gene (see Mike Ashton's article Fancy Fowl March 2009)

Trout Runners

Runners also splashed out on colours on the continent. Early Dutch imports were probably crossed with farmyard ducks to make various European utility breeds – a process very similar to the making of utility ducks in the UK. The Runner type was retained however in the Trout Runner, which is said to have arrived in Germany from France. The colour became popular at the German shows in the 1950s and was imported into the UK in the 1970s. This was along with the Mallard Runner which has always been a bit of an enigma and the odd one out. We now know why. It is dark phase; yet most classic Runners are light phase. Unless breeders know the implications, the Mallard is a very hard colour to get right. It really is not a 'natural' Runner colour at all, because the dark phase (Li+) of the mallard Runner has been adopted from European ducks.

Trouts were popular, and went on to make more colours. Add the blue gene to Trout Runner and they become, in the words of one German breeder 'riotous colours.' Add one blue gene and it's the Blue Trout. Add two and it's the Apricot Trout (Blau-Gelb), the same colour as the heavy Saxony duck.

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Silver Runners ('Silber-wildfarbig' in German)

Not content with Trout (Forellenfarbig) and Blau-Gelb, the German breeders went a step further and used the 'silver' or harlequin gene. This gene is recessive and is certainly masked by birds with dark phase. So it can seem to pop out of nowhere—as it did with Mrs Campbell's original ducks. More likely perhaps, in Germany, the Silver Runner may have originated as a cross with the Abacot Ranger which is called the 'Streicher' over there. Hence the misnomer of the 'Streicher' Runner in the UK, for the Streicher is the German name for a breed, not the colour form: Silber-wildfarbig.

Silver seems to have been an instant hit but, with just a few imports into the UK, the birds have become rather inbred. Astute cross-breeding with the right types for colour genes should solve the problem, and also maintain that lovely hood so typical of the silver ducks.

Fawn-and-white Indian Runners

To many people, the Fawn-&-white is still the archetypal Runner: it was the first to be standardized in 1901 and has been illustrated hundreds of times. These are the birds which were thought to be 'brought from India by a sea captain to Whitehaven' as related by J. Donald over 100 years ago. However, the origin of the cargoes was unknown. It is likely that they came from Malaysia or the 'Malay Archipelago' which included part of Indonesia, or of course from Sumatra and Java. FAO pictures of ducks in those regions today still show White Runners, Fawn Runners, and the occasional Fawn-&-whites.



Silver duck and two drakes. These are the same colour as the Silver Call and the Abacot Ranger. They all have the 'silver' i.e. harlequin gene. When Mrs Campbell was experimenting with commercial ducks around 1900, she first produced birds with the silver gene. They are illustrated in 1902 in Harrison Weir. The silver gene later emerged in crosses of Runners and Campbells around 1917/1918, to make the silver Abacot Ranger in the UK.



Blue genes have now been added to the Fawn Runner to make the Blue Dusky and the Apricot Dusky in this colour sequence.

This pied gene with brown is a very striking colour pattern, depicted as early as 17th century by Dutch painters. It seems to have caught people's imagination both in the Far East and Europe for centuries. But in fact, in the Runners, it is the odd one out. It is dark phase rather than light phase and cannot easily be crossed with other standard Runner colours. The pied gene spoils all the other Runner colours, and the dark phase interferes with the light phase. So, colour crosses with the pied introduce colour faults which build in problems for generations to come, especially for the unpractised and unwary.

Whilst Runners have not, as yet, produced as many colour variants as the Calls, they do have the potential to do so because the duck colours do span the breeds. These birds are all the same species as the wild mallard. Yet there never had been a demand for bibbed Runners: that is just regarded as a fault. Many of the other colours are possible and some have already been made. Khaki, Magpie and 'Appleyard' colours have been produced, as well as the 'Welsh Harlequin' (brown silver) but I do wonder if anybody fancies making a Yellow Belly!

Interested in Runners? Why not join the Indian Runner Duck Association for regular Newsletters with articles about their colour, history, the shows, and management queries from their owners.

References:

- 1 *The Indian Runner: A Historical Guide* by Ashton & Ashton 2002
- 2 *The Domestic Duck*, Ashton & Ashton 2001, Crowood Press

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