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THE FACTORY FARMING OF DUCKS

BRIEFING

Around 90% of the 18 million ducks reared each year in the UK are factory farmed. They are kept in huge overcrowded sheds. These hold up to 10,000 ducks, even though traditionally a maximum flock of 200 was advised.

All farmed ducks originate from the wild mallard, which has been domesticated for about 2,000 years, or from Muscovy ducks. The latter originated in South America and are more aggressive than mallards.

In natural conditions, mallards live socially in large flocks during autumn and winter but disperse into pairs during the breeding season. The female rears the young until they can fly, the ducklings learning from the mother's actions. The ducklings' down feathers are oiled by contact with their mother's oily feathers; this in effect 'waterproofs' the ducklings and helps protect them when they come into contact with water.

Fundamental importance of water for ducks

The main welfare problem for factory farmed ducks is that they are given no access to water, except drinking water. Yet ducks are essentially aquatic birds. In natural conditions they swim, dive and clean themselves in water. They also eat in water, using their complex bills to sieve food particles from rivers and ponds. It is unacceptable to keep ducks without regular access to a pond, lake or stream.

Denial of water causes serious health problems for ducks. The Ministry of Agriculture has stated that if ducks cannot immerse their heads in water "their eyes seem to get scaly and crusty, and in extreme cases, blindness may follow".

The Recommendation made under the European Convention For The Protection Of Animals Kept For Farming Purposes recognises the fundamental importance of water for ducks. This states that "under wild conditions, the mallard is largely aquatic" and that for the mallard "important elements of bathing are the immersion of the head and wings, and shaking water from these over the body".

Ducks spend considerable time performing complex preening behaviours. After feeding followed by bathing, ducks carry out a variety of shaking movements to remove water. Foreign bodies are then removed by cleaning movements and an elaborate sequence is carried out to distribute oil on the feathers from the uropygial gland above the tail. This is necessary for waterproofing and heat regulation. Ducks with no access to water cannot preen and clean themselves properly.

Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) believes that keeping ducks without access to water other than drinking water is totally unacceptable as this deprives them of the ability to perform their most essential natural behaviours and also leads to serious health problems. We believe that ducks must be kept free-range. From the age of 4 weeks, they must have continuous and easy access to outdoor runs and – crucially – to a pond, lake or stream which is deep enough for them to immerse their bodies. The water must be carefully maintained to minimise any build-up of stagnant water, decaying vegetation or other sources of pollution.

Ideally ducks should have access to water much earlier than at 4 weeks of age as in natural conditions the mother duck oils the feathers of ducklings to waterproof them so that they can swim from the first days of life. However, where in farming systems ducklings are kept without their mother and so without the protection of her feather oils, they would become sodden and risk getting chilled and even drowning if they swam before 3 or 4 weeks of age.

In natural conditions, ducks not only swim but also can fly for several miles. Even domesticated ducks are capable of short flights. Such an activity is impossible in the confines of the factory farm.

Rapid growth, walking difficulties and leg disorders

Today's ducks have been genetically selected for fast weight gain. Cherry Valley states that their "table duckling of today not only grows 10% more quickly than did its predecessor of a few years ago, but it also contains 25% more breast meat". Faster growth rates and increased breast meat in broiler chickens and turkeys have resulted in leg problems and ducks appear to be going the same way. The Recommendation made under the European Convention confirms that the heavier birds, in particular those selected for meat production, not only may be unable to fly, but may also have difficulty in walking and be subject to leg disorders.

These problems are compounded by the fact that in the overcrowded factory farming sheds the ducks get little exercise; this can cause stunted bone growth, which is frequently observed in young ducks.

Factory farmed ducks are generally slaughtered at 7 weeks of age (8 weeks tends to be the maximum), even though in natural conditions they can live to 15 years or more. CIWF believes that much higher minimum slaughter ages should be laid down by law. This would require the use of slower growing breeds, which are much less prone to leg disorders.

De-beaking

Male Muscovy ducks and hybrids fight frequently using their claws, wings and beaks. The Muscovy's beak is sharp, unlike the mallard's. To prevent injury, Muscovies and hybrids are often de-beaked. This is painful as the beak is richly innervated (supplied with nerves) and very well supplied with sensory receptors (this is stated in the Recommendation made under the European Convention). Research shows that "de-beaking of ducklings is ... traumatic to the bird as the beak is innervated up to the tip" (*Raud & Faure, 1994*). Another paper states that: "trimming of the beak involves an operation on a sensitive region which is painful and may be assumed to cause restrictions to the function of the beak, at least until the wound has healed (*Matthes & Marquardt*). However, the authors went on to say that even if wounds do heal "there is no functional substitution for lost structures. The [de-beaking] severely impaired the function of the beak as a probing organ".

The Ministry of Agriculture has stated that feather-pulling (which de-beaking is designed to prevent) is caused by "overcrowding, lack of water, sporadic feeding and the use of pellets" – all these are facets of factory farming. CIWF believes that ducks should not be farmed in conditions which encourage feather-pulling.

CIWF believes that de-beaking should be prohibited. Ducks should be given continuous daytime access to outdoor runs and water. This would reduce the incidence of feather-pulling. Moreover, Muscovies and hybrids should not be used in farming if it is not possible to keep them without their fighting leading to injuries.

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This briefing draws heavily upon "Ducks out of Water", a report on the UK duck industry by FAWN and VIVA!

REFERENCES: Raud H. & Faure, J.M., 1994. Welfare of ducks in intensive units. *Rev. Sci. Tech. Off. Int. Epiz.* 13 (1), 125-129. 1994.

Matthes S. & Marquardt G. Histology of the Muscovy Duck's beak with and without trimming. Institute for Small Animal Research. Dornbergstr. 25-27, 3100 Celle, Germany.