

## Adoption of young by Versicolor Teal and other wildfowl

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It is well known that a pair of Common Shelduck or European Eider will, in the wild state, foster the families of other pairs. I myself have seen two Shelduck with 30 ducklings of widely varying ages. However, little is known about adoption in other species of waterfowl.

For some years I have reared ducklings on the free-range system, i.e. broods of ducklings with their bantam foster-parents are put out in small pens on the water's edge in the enclosure where I keep my breeding pairs of duck. The ducklings, during the day, range at will all over the enclosure mixing with adult ducks. They return to their bantam to rest during the day and to sleep at night. When they are all tucked under the hen in the evening I close the entrance to the rearing pen which is then rat-proof. They are let out first thing in the morning. My waterfowl enclosure, incidentally, consists of a stream about 150 yards long running through an acre of land.

Due to this rearing system and the opportunities it offers for observation, I have come to the conclusion that adoption is practised, in certain circumstances, by a variety of species of duck and probably geese. The circumstances which induce adoption appear to be:

- A, when a sitting duck has had her eggs taken from her.
- B, when a duck has recently lost her brood.

In one instance a bantam had two Versicolor ducklings aged about 3 weeks. A pair of Versicolor, whose second clutch I had recently taken, set about abducting these two ducklings. Wherever the ducklings went the Versicolor duck and drake shadowed them. Their approach was very gentle and accompanied by muffled quacks from the duck and a soft nasal purr from the drake. When the ducklings were shut up at night the Versicolor duck and drake slept as close as possible to the bantam coop, keeping up a continuous soft chatter. The duck sat in a brooding posture and shuffled to form a scoop. Within four days the adoption was complete, the ducklings no longer showing any interest in their bantam foster-mother. The Versicolor drake did not brood the ducklings but acted as escort and never left them.

A week or two later when the second clutch of Versicolor hatched (six of them) I put them out under a bantam

just as I had done the first two. When these were two or three days old I was, for some reason or other, unable to shut them up one night. The following morning I looked under the bantam hen and found she had no ducklings. The Versicolor drake was looking after the two large ducklings but his duck was missing. I searched and found her brooding the six babies in a reed bed. During the night or early in the morning she must have enticed the lot away from the bantam. From then on the two broods amalgamated and all were reared. This business of Versicolors stealing ducklings from bantams happens here every rearing season. Last year, having stolen and reared their early brood, they nested again. This may indicate that the species is double-brooded in the wild.

It seems that Versicolors prefer to adopt ducklings of their own species. They ignore ducklings of other species if there are available ducklings of their own kind. However, I have found that they will adopt ducklings of other species rather than be deprived of a family altogether. I allowed a Cinnamon Teal to hatch her own eggs. She came off with four ducklings. The day they left the nest a vandal shot and killed their mother. The evening was chilly when I went down to the stream and heard the pathetic piping of the little orphans. To catch them would have been difficult and almost certainly they would not have accepted a bantam foster or mixed with another brood. Left to their own devices it seemed certain they would perish from cold but I decided they must take that chance. It was nearly dark when I revisited the stream, all was quiet, not a sound from the little ducklings nor was there any sign of them. The following morning there they were, full of life and escorted by a pair of Versicolors who must have brooded them overnight. All were reared.

Versicolors are wonderful parents, not only will they protect their ducklings from rats but they will, if approached too closely, attack a human being, keeping up the attack for a distance of 30 or 40 yards. When they do this their ducklings huddle together in mid-stream and await their parents' return, as if instructed to do so.

One year, a European Green-winged Teal duck, whose eggs I had taken, enticed away from their bantam a brood of European Wigeon which was two weeks old. Whenever I went down to the stream

the Teal duck swam right up to me and then flapped around just as a wild Teal will do if danger threatens her family. When she did this her Wigeon ducklings fled for cover.

On another occasion a Red-breasted Goose whose goslings had been stolen and whose gander had been beaten up by thugs, attached herself to a pair of Versicolors with a very young brood. The goose did her best to share the task of rearing them and would not be parted from them. The Versicolors did not seem to object to her presence.

I have also had a case of a duckling inviting adoption. A wild Mallard duckling was washed down the overflow pipe from the pool above my enclosure and into my stream. Being unable to find the way back to its mother, who kept answering its calls, the little creature drifted away downstream. Lonely and afraid, it came upon a Wigeon duck. To this it snuggled up, keeping close to the Wigeon's breast. This invitation to be adopted was rejected and it then made overtures to another duck with the same result. About half an hour after sunset a brood of Teal came swimming by on the way to their brooding pen. The Mallard duckling tagged on to them, followed them into the pen and without any hesitation ran up the ramp, into the coop and straight under the hen. From then onwards it lived with the brood of Teal and made no attempt to rejoin its mother on the pool about 100 yards away.

I have evidence that Red-crested Pochard readily adopt ducklings of their own species. At one time I used to rear ducklings under a bantam in small pens in which the ducklings were confined all the time. There were about twelve of these pens situated in the enclosure, all in line and semi-detached. Sometimes each pen held a brood of ducklings: Carolinas in one, Cinnamon Teal in another, Wigeon in another and so on. In one of these pens there was a brood of Red-crested Pochard. My Red-crested Pochard duck immediately picked out the pochard brood and sat outside their pen all day trying to entice or get to the ducklings. Ducklings of varieties other than her own did not interest her. Her behaviour was identical with that of the Versicolors when they were trying to

entice ducklings except, of course, that the drake Red-crested Pochard showed no interest in his offspring.

*Janet Kear adds:*

Mr. Wintle's excellent observations show how much of scientific interest can be achieved by an aviculturist with even a small collection of waterfowl. We hope that others will be encouraged to study the behaviour of their birds in a similar way. Captive waterfowl seem to behave, within certain limits, much as they do in the wild and because many breed readily and become engagingly tame, all manner of interesting things happen in full view.

At the Wildfowl Trust we have also had a recent case of a failed breeder adopting the young of another bird. In 1967 our Spur-winged Goose female, who has no mate but often lays, was given some Mallard eggs to sit on, of which she hatched three. It was a comic sight to see these tiny creatures brooded, led and vigorously defended by such a monster. When the ducklings were about a week old, the party was adopted by a Mallard female, who had laid in the same pen but had recently lost her clutch. All five birds became inseparable, and at first the two females shared the duties of brooding and defence in apparent harmony. Finally, however, the Mallard took over the ducklings entirely and it was she they ran to when danger threatened.

It seems that frustrated parenthood produces, in some birds, the strongest urge towards adoption. It has been suggested by a number of workers that the 'guardian' adults, found with crèches of flamingo, shelduck or eider young, are not in fact the parents of any of the chicks, but failed breeders. In Common Shelduck, most parents leave on moult migration while their young are still downy. It is possible that in frustrated adults even this strong migratory tendency can be overcome by the sight and sound of deserted ducklings.

Mr. Wintle has also provided further evidence that newly-hatched wildfowl are not always irreversibly 'imprinted' on the first large moving object that they see, since the Versicolor babies were enticed away from their foster bantam by an adult pair of their own species.

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