

TALKING TEAL

Well no - teal are many and varied, but I don't think any actually talk, it's more about me talking about them. I use the term teal loosely in the vernacular without any pretence to scientific accuracy and seek to discuss and explore some of the ducks suffixed teal that are most commonly kept in wildfowl collections, whether or not they are more closely related genetically to other wildfowl rather than to other teal.

Teal are small duck and as such the demand they made on food and water is limited as is their potential to damage garden plants or to erode the edges of ponds. Accordingly they can be readily kept by anyone with a little spare land.

The options are to keep them as pinioned birds or full winged. If young birds are winged clipped to keep them flightless until their first summer moult, the then full winged birds seldom stray thereafter. It is, though, not permitted to allow non-native species into the wild. Full winged birds survive better during inclement weather and are less vulnerable to ground predators; however, I have found that they are more susceptible to birds of prey, principally sparrowhawks, as these birds prefer to catch their prey in flight and do not risk crash landing into the ground.

If you can afford a sufficiently large, fully covered enclosure, birds can be kept free winged from birth without the risk of hawks. Also, if the enclosure is sufficiently robust, with the added benefit of vermin protection and savings on feed which is not going into the beaks of crows, pigeons, mallards, moorhens, magpies and the many other creatures looking for a free lunch. I calculate that I use three times as much food feeding birds in the open in comparison with those in covered pens. To me, there is no pleasure in looking at ducks through fencing, so I would only consider a covered enclosure that if it could be made big enough to sit and relax inside it.

All ducks need clean water, but they will be perfectly healthy on quite small ponds, as long as the water is clean, although lack of space will impair their ability to breed successfully. Generally, I prefer to keep at least two pairs of any species, as the interaction between them encourages display and breeding and makes them more interesting to watch. All of the teal I mention below are commonly kept in collections, but all serious collectors should try and keep at least one other more unusual species even if it isn't quite as showy. Whilst duck keeping has become more popular in the last 20 years, the range of species commonly kept appears to be reducing.

Lastly, if you are starting a new collection, buy your birds from a reputable breeder rather than from an auction where you probably won't know how old it is, whether it is inbred with one of its relations, or whether it is from a pure strain without some cross breeding. The cost of the birds is so low in comparison to feeding and housing them that it really is a false economy to save a few pounds for birds you know nothing about.

Garganey, Blue Winged and Cinnamon Teal

These closely related teal have a blue grey patch on their wing from which the blue winged teal gets its name. A similar wing patch on some species of shoveller suggests a close relationship to that group of ducks. To avoid the risk of interbreeding, I would not keep these species together unless pair bonds were already well established.

These are sociable ducks that normally show little aggression to other species. They can be somewhat shy breeders and need space to search out dense vegetation, in which their nests can prove very difficult to find. Being ground nesters, they can be vulnerable to rats when on the nest, so predator control at this time of the year needs to be particularly vigilant. Once hatched, the youngsters are easy to rear on starter crumbs or similar products.

They appear to be kept less by collectors now than in the past, but should be available from good breeders for around £60.

The blue winged teal is, I find an undemonstrative duck. The handsome drake courts its mate with a series of head bobbing movements accompanied by a gentle whistle. They tend to be late layers, in the second half of May.

The garganey is one of the larger teal. It is a rarity in being a summer visitor and rare breeder in the wild in the British Isles. I have not found them very free breeders and they also have the disadvantage of the male only moulting into its breeding plumage in February, hence for most of the year he resembles his brown mate. Nonetheless, he is a particularly handsome bird and his colours are well worth waiting for. The drake also has a most unusual call that sounds rather like a fishing reel, which adds to the charm of these birds in display.

The cinnamon teal as the name implies is a rich cinnamon colour. I find it a very handsome duck but it doesn't seem to be particularly popular with other collectors and may be available at a bargain price. About £50 per pair would be about the correct price. These are early layers (April) and breed more freely than the species above, in thick undergrowth. They will readily lay a second clutch if the first is removed, but, by the time these are laid when the vegetation is at its thickest, I find their nests almost impossible to locate without hours of vigilance.

Green Winged and Baikal Teal

The similarity of the plumage structure of these two species suggests a common origin. Perhaps the Baikal teal became an isolated population in the depths of Siberian Russia and evolved slowly into a separate species. However, apart from plumage behaviourally these teal are quite different.

The green winged teal show two different forms, The American green-winged teal and the European teal that is a common winter visiting duck to our shores. The experts argue at length as to whether they are different species or merely sub-species, but, whatever one's views on this, the males are sufficiently different ((for example the vertical white line on the American form replaced with a horizontal one on its European cousin) to merit special care to ensure bloodlines are kept pure. It seems now to be very difficult to buy the American form in this country and to be absolutely sure that they are pure. (Visually the females are virtually indistinguishable) and I would need a lot of evidence before buying such birds purporting to be pure Americans.

The green-winged teal are lively birds, with a delightful display similar to that of mallard and pintail. A little group is a pleasure to watch, particularly in April/May when breeding is imminent. These teal are more nervous than most, and I have found full winged ones to be particularly panicky, but this does not stop them breeding freely, and the youngsters are easy to raise.

Baikal are large teal, they spend less time on the water than most ducks and are also quite strongly nocturnal in their habits. In the past they have proved shy breeders and hence have commanded prices in excess of £100, but they do now seem rather more plentiful - It may be that better blood lines are now available.

They are late breeders, normally not laying until late May or June. When ducks are laying or about to lay, the drakes, mallard like, can collectively harass the female (as is also the case with green-winged teal). Best breeding success can be achieved by having pairs of Baikal in separate but adjacent pens where they can challenge each other but also be free to mate and lay without interference.

The drake Baikal comes into colour in early winter but the end of its feathers slowly abrade, so that it reaches its full glory only in the spring. I have also found with Baikal that they have split personalities and can be quite retiring for most of the year but bold and tame in the breeding season. These teal are very hardy and their tame ducklings are a delight to raise.

Hottentot, Puna and Vesicolor Teal

These teal, like many other southern hemisphere ducks, share the characteristic that male and female plumages are similar and they have no eclipse phase where the male loses its showy colours. As such they can add a splash of colour to a collection in the summer and early autumn, when northern hemisphere species are looking dowdy.

All three types have similar colouration, with blue/grey bills a black cap and vermiculated grey strips or spots on the flanks.

Puna and Versicolor Teal

The Puna and versicolor teal are usually considered to be races of the same species with different geographical ranges within South America. The Puna is a significantly larger bird that no doubt helps to cope with the extreme conditions it experiences in the High Andes that forms part of its range.

These ducks are easy to keep and quiet in habit, although occasionally the Puna and versicolor males can be pushy in the height of the breeding season. Puna/versicolor teal nest in thick vegetation or a ground nesting box

Hottentot Teal

Hottentot are the smallest of all wildfowl, named after the Hottentot Tribe in Africa who are noted for their small stature!

In captivity they tend to nest in raised boxes. These are best designed, as for most hole-nesting ducks, with two chambers; an outer porch dropping down to a nesting chamber. This seems to give ducks an extra feeling of security, whilst deterring egg thieves and making it less likely that eggs will be dragged out off the nest when the brooding duck comes off to feed.

Their small size and quiet demeanour means that Hottentot tend to be at the bottom of the pecking order. I think it is for this reason that, when kept with other duck, spring clutches of eggs often have poor hatching success. This may be either because the pairs can't get sufficient peace or quiet to mate successfully or alternatively the sitting duck is turfed off the nest by other larger ducks, themselves looking for nest sites, resulting in the eggs chilling. I have found autumn clutches (and they can lay at almost any time) to be more successful.

I have found that Hottentot eggs do not hatch very well in an incubator (although no doubt a more sophisticated machine than mine may prove successful) and accordingly, have tended to leave them with the parent bird almost up to the point of hatching, before removing the eggs to hatch and rear them artificially. A number of my ducks were determined to have round nests even although they were in rectangular nest boxes and would adjust the nesting material to leave holes in all 4 corners. Unfortunately they or other visiting ducks would tumble some of their eggs down these holes to be lost.

Young Hottentot ducklings are very small and a bit delicate. It is best to give them very shallow dishes of water at first. Duckweed, to supplement crumbs, is a good way to get them feeding.

Hottentot are not the hardiest of ducks in cold weather. They do best when full winged and are ideal aviary ducks. They need water free from ice to swim in at all times. Late hatching ducklings ideally need some heat to get them through their first winter.

Ringed Teal

Ringed teal are one of the favourite ducks of just about any collector. Many years ago, they used to be rare in collections and hence expensive but now they are widely available. The drake is a handsome duck with its spotted pink chest, rich brown back and grey sides, whilst the pale neat little female is also attractive. They are hardy and like perching on branches a few feet off the ground or above the water and are another ideal free winged aviary bird. I have found that pairs either don't breed or bred prolifically. I regularly raised more than 20 birds from a single pair spread over 3 clutches. Their young are tame and easily raised.

Other Teal

There are many other types of teal you may consider keeping that are relatively easy to keep and sociable in habit including; Cape Teal, Chestnut Breasted Teal, Brazilian Teal and Sharp Winged Teal.

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