

Stockmanship

by Simon Tarsnane
Stockton, California

Editor's Note: The following article is actually the first chapter in a book titled "*Waterfowl — A Guide to Maintenance and Propagation.*" It was written by Simon Tarsnane, a British aviculturist now living in the United States. Tarsnane gained much experience working at the Wildfowl Trust in England, then went on to manage several prominent waterfowl collections in Europe and the U.S.A. For information on how to obtain the book and various avicultural video tapes, contact Tarsnane Productions, Inc., 4777 Grouse Run Drive, #156, Stockton, CA 95207.

"Stockmanship" and "stockmen" are terms normally associated with agricultural enterprises. The swineherd, shepherd and herdsmen are all stockmen, as are cowboys and poultry men. They all have one thing in common; a good stockman is a planner. He knows everything about his charges before his season begins. He knows when a particular cow or sheep will be giving birth, or that grazing in a field is coming to an end and plan for new grass areas. He is a vet, biologist, countryman, manager, woodsman, carpenter and handyman, but most importantly a good stockman cares deeply about his animals. He knows not to drive a tractor into a barn full of laying hens or calving cattle. He knows by the sky that tomorrow will be bitterly cold and moves extra food and protection for his beasts — instinctive behavior.

It is important to realize that keeping waterfowl is an avocation, not an occupation, and attention to the flock is often necessary 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it is carried out on the bird's schedule, not yours. With waterfowl there are literally millions of do's and don'ts that can only be taught by experience and lots of dedication. Some of us are lucky enough to be full-time waterfowl breeders and keepers, but most waterfowl enthusiasts have other jobs (in order to support their expensive hobby) and simply cannot be around

their ducks all the time. In short, in order to be a good stockman it is often necessary to sacrifice sleep and other activities to meet the demands of the birds, and success seems to be directly proportional to time involved with them.

A good waterfowl person is a sort of duck psychologist. He knows how his ducks behave, what they do and don't do, what they like and hate. He is capable of duping a pair of unproductive birds into laying by inducing a mental state suitable for breeding. He may notice a pair of birds are uneasy in their surroundings — maybe because of their pen mates, or the geography of the pen. He may then move out some pen members and landscape the aviary, giving his problem pair the state of tranquility they require.

When feeding, he doesn't rush through the pens spewing grain and pellets out of buckets. Taking his time, he empties old food away, picks up spilt food, feathers, wire and cigarette butts. He observes each of his waterfowl quietly and carefully, looking for that little limp that may indicate a foot infection — "How did the bird get it? Is the pond side too rough? Is the fence mesh the problem? How did it occur? How about that old Rosybill? She's looking a bit hunched up — that usual bright eye looks a bit dull. These geese look a bit thin and they haven't been eating too well. The grass is good in this pen — ah! That's it — they've got worms — I'll put some Thibenzole in the food for 5 days. Yes, this pond needs a cleaning. I'd better pick up all the bristles and remember to turn off the hose afterwards — I don't want a swamp in here!

How about the breeding pens? Is that mix of wood ducks, hooded mergansers and goldeneye a good one? Do I need a pair of geese to keep down the grass? Ruddyheads — yes, they'd look nice in here — but too aggressive — they'd pick on the ducks. Wait a moment — carolinas, hoodies and goldeneye all use the same type of box. Problems here — there will be birds fighting over boxes and annoying each other. Better put in some ground nesters and take out the wood ducks. Then I can make the hooded box holes smaller so the goldeneye can't get in, and use the larger holes for the goldeneye. . . ' and so on.

Let's run through a season and identify the sort of topics and hazards that may arise.

July-August sees most waterfowl flightless and in eclipse plumage. Instinctively the birds are nervous. This is

the time of year in the wild that predation occurs so easily because they are flightless. They spend more time on water. Can they get out all right or will they beat their pin feathers on the side of the pond and bleed? They need protein and fiber in order to harden those new quills. Some grain mixed with the pellets will help. Give them enough areas of shade and hiding cover. Make certain no one is getting bullied by already moulted birds. If the weather is wet — are those eclipse feathers getting soaked? If it's not wet, have the birds got enough cool shade?

Coming into September the birds are almost fully feathered. The hoodies are already displaying; the wood ducks and mandarins are back in color. The days are shorter and it's colder in the early morning. Add a little more wheat to the diet to develop more of a fat layer to combat oncoming winter. Are those big trees outside the fence safe or will they come crashing down on the fence in a gale? The vermin are moving more now sensing hard weather ahead. Put out some traps. The leaves need cleaning up. Put back feeding time an hour in the morning and advance it an hour in the evening so during the ducks' most active periods they have privacy and food. If you have a stream or river supplying your ponds, keep an eye on the weather; there may be flooding. Check indoor quarters for your birds if you live in an area that gets cold during winter. Disinfect bowls and drinking equipment and check heat lights. If your birds winter outside order some straw for bedding and erect shelters.

November sees the days shortening even more. Winds and the first snows can be expected this month in some northern states. Check aviary roofs for strength. Be ready to get out of bed at 3 a.m. to push snow off netting. Check water pumps if you use them to make sure they are okay for the next month or so. Maybe heat tape the inlet and outlet pipes to prevent freezing. Check aerators and bubblers. Now is the time to bring in some of the smaller or tropical species such as ringed teal, Orinoco geese, magpie geese and tree ducks. Also now is the time to bring in nest boxes to dry; ready to be cleaned and repainted.

December-February are the coldest months. In the cold northern states, all but the hardiest birds are inside. Those outside have straw, shelter and heat. Ponds have bubblers, heat bars, or aerators to maintain some open water. Pumps are turned off before they freeze solid. The indoor birds must not be

crowded. Stress induced maladies rear their ugly heads — Terramycin antibiotic is mixed and put in drinkers. Occasional things happen indoors; the odd bird starts "paddling," not wanting to settle in the water and the condition of its breast feathers deteriorates. A preen gland check reveals a lack of oil. It's a teal, so .2 cc's of pen-strep (penicillin and streptomycin) is injected into the breast muscle. Two days later she is fine. A smew breaks a leg high up at the hip jumping into an empty pond during cleaning. The vet says it won't mend — "It's too high a break to be able to splint." An hour's thought comes up with a tape splint. A little improvisation pays off and two months later he is walking with barely a trace of a limp.

Birds indoors don't like to be on concrete floors. Bumble foot develops quite quickly under these conditions. I use Neo-Tex rubber matting (*not astroturf* — the geese destroy it and eat the little green plastic bits).

Indoor lighting must be turned off at night otherwise birds may start moulting and Arctic birds start to think it must be summer. Heat fans set at 50°F are used and the fan blades suitably wired over to prevent teal flying in and being chopped to pieces.

Cleaning is a daily job, done slowly and quietly to avoid stressing the birds. All standing water puddles are dispersed so that a dry surround to the pool is maintained. Remember, a warm, wet duck is as dead as a cold, wet duck. The fans move air so no damp, still pockets form, bringing bronchial or aspergillosis outbreaks.

The sides of the outside ponds are kept ice free so birds can get out. Empty pens have their ponds chlorinated, soaked, and rinsed thoroughly ready for spring.

March can bring bad weather, but is generally warmer. Birds indoors have their heat reduced gradually so that they acclimatize to outdoor temperatures. Two weeks should be enough. Nest boxes are put out, ponds filled and more breeders pellets added to the diet. Grit is changed from granite chip to oystershell to help egg formation. Incubators are checked, fumigated and tested. Brooders and infrared lights are checked and feeding bowls and drinkers for young birds sterilized.

A breeding pen plan is made. Why didn't the smew breed well last year? Was it because the hooded mergansers kept flying from the bottom pond and using the smew boxes? A partition will prevent this. Were the Ross' geese upset because of the ruddyheads next door

continually "mock" charging the fence? Some fiberglass sheeting between the two pens will settle them. Why was the black-necked swan clutch infertile? Too small a pond or too shallow so they couldn't copulate properly? Deepen and enlarge the pond or switch them to a more suitable pen. Was the reason that the Barrows golden-eye didn't lay (when you were certain that they would) because of the eiders in the same pen pushing them around? Were the boxes properly positioned? Check it!

Finally the birds are put outside. As they are released, check their wing bands or leg bands. Replace old, worn ones. Color band females individually so you can see who is laying and who isn't. Keep a record of all your birds' age, origin, pinioned or full winged, past breeding performance, parents, etc. The diet is breeder pellet only as the birds settle into a new season. Eggs are picked up and recorded daily when the bird is off the nest. Keep an eye open for egg bound birds. The vermin are really moving now — more traps. The weather can be uncertain — bring in clutches from low lying, flood affected areas just in case. Test the incubator and get that generator installed in case of spring power failures. Eggs are set and candled and infertile and dead ones disposed of.

April-July sees all the usual laying, hatching and rearing activity — sitting up nights helping weak birds out of eggs — swearing to improve the blood lines next season! And so on and so on . . .

All of these points are a mere handful of the sort of things a conscientious waterfowl keeper will be thinking and doing.

Weather varies up and down the hemispheres, thus it is safe to say if you are in Florida your birds may never have to be indoors, whereas in North Dakota and Montana they may be.

Those points are the basics of waterfowl maintenance, and if an individual "hasn't the time," then stamp collecting is a far better pasttime!

In early summer your friends might phone you and say, "Can we come and see the birds?" They more than likely possess a horde of small, rampaging hooligans who have no idea of how to behave around your stock. Explain to them nicely that the birds are laying and very vulnerable to being upset and deserting nests because of ill-mannered behavior. Tell them to come in October when all the birds are back in color again. "Oh, no — it's too cold then" — Well, you didn't really want to see them anyway, did you?!

Continued on page 52

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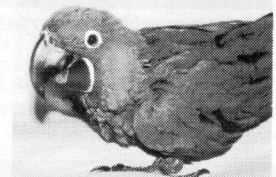
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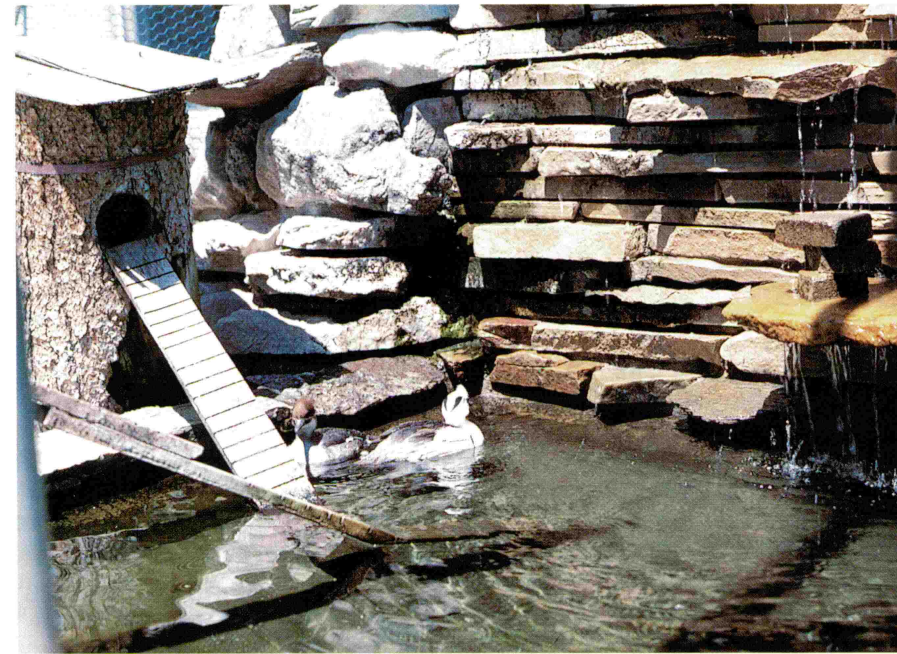
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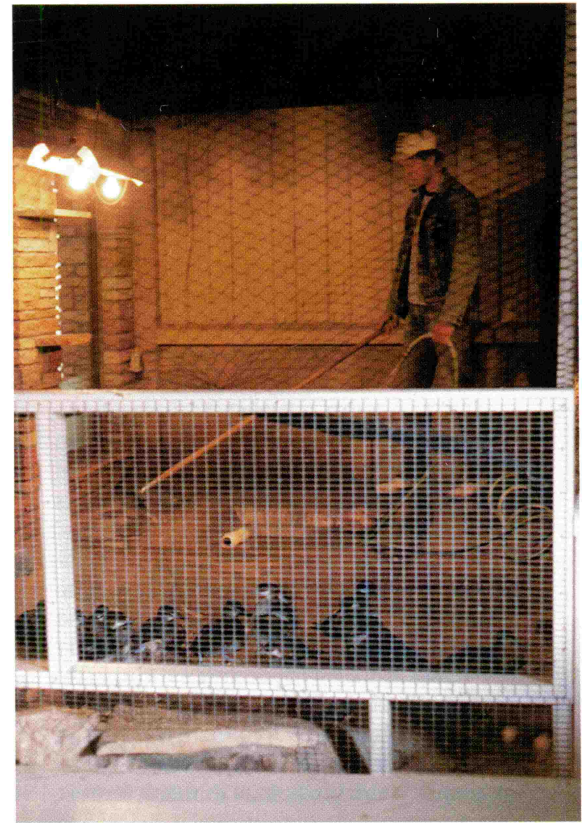
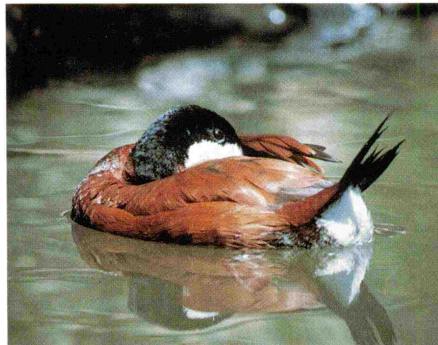


A picturesque pen with a waterfall for a pair of smew.

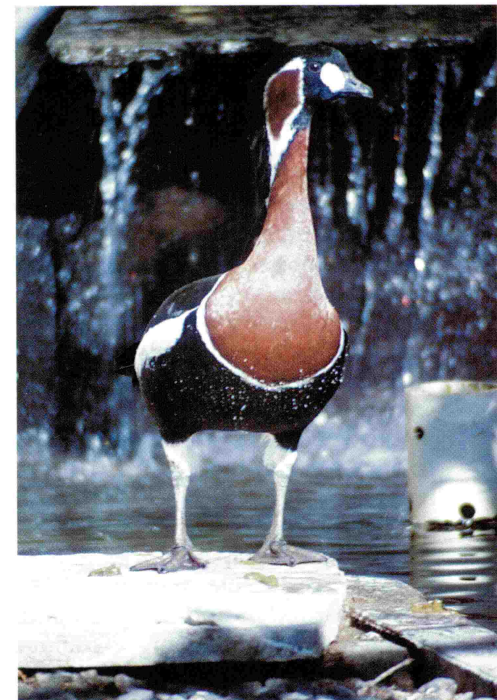
Be observant around your birds. This female ringed teal is just about to lay as is evidenced by the bulging vent.



Even when supposedly sleeping, water-fowl remain alert. This, a male American ruddy duck.



Indoor facilities for rearing and wintering are important. They should be cleaned regularly and meticulously without stressing the occupants.



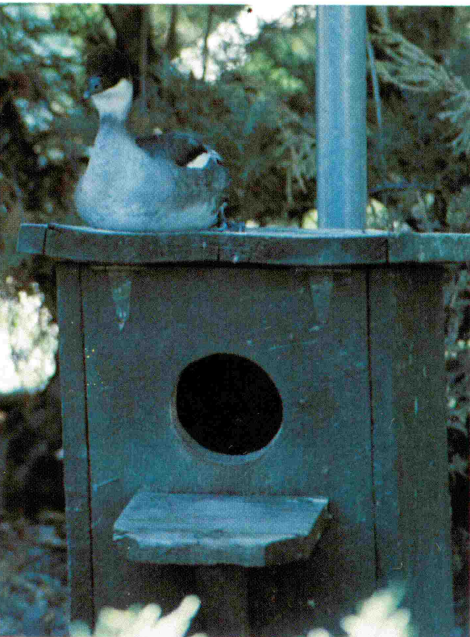
Red breasted goose — this one keeping a wary eye on the author as his female is sitting.



Waterfowl ponds do not have to be big to be productive. A pair of hooded mergansers and some barlequins inspect nestboxes.



A group of Hottentot teal from Africa.



Some waterfowl like this female smew openly brag about their choice of nestboxes.



Eyton's whistling duck.

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THE FEATHER FARM offers baby birds for 1987. Macaws, milligolds, Catalinas, harlequins, calicos, blue & golds, green wings, scarlets, militaries, red fronts, hyacinths, eclectus (4 species), caiques, mini macaws, cockatoos, conures & sexed pairs of emu chicks. Most available now. Will ship. Call (707) 255-8833. Napa, CA.

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DOMESTIC, SPOON-FED BABIES: with cooperation we expect scarlets, greenwings, blue & golds, umbrellas, Moluccans, Congo greys, blue fronts. Also male and female scarlets from 1986 hatch. References available and pictures on request. Linda Johnston, Austin, TX, call (512) 282-1382.

DOMESTIC HAND-FED BABIES: super tame, all close banded, 1987 hatch. Large blue & golds and military macaws. Normal and green/blue ringnecks; some s/s. Moustache and crimson wings, rose-breasted cockatoos. Char. (602) 936-1334, Arizona.

STANLEY, PENNANT and gold mantled rosellas, rock pebbliers, yellow red rumps, turquoisines; some proven breeders. Parakeets, cockatiels and zebra finch also available. Burke's Birds, P.O. Box 26017, San Bernardino, CA 92406. Call (714) 887-8722 or (213) 569-1913.

MACAW BABIES: scarlets, greenwings, blue and gold, Catalinas, calicos. Also Congo greys. Spoon-fed. All hatched at Jett's Petting Zoo. Call (714) 823-6170. So. California.

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SURGICALLY SEXED: 1987 hatched pionus: white caps \$300. Bronze wings and dusks \$450 each. Richard Zimmerman, (517) 783-4439, Michigan.

ASIAN PARAKEETS — s/s pairs: Indian ringnecks \$150, Indian ringnecks s/l \$250, Indian ringnecks lutino \$600, plum-headed \$250, moustache \$250, Alexandrian ringnecks \$500. FINEST BIRD FARM, southern California, (714) 524-9653.

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