



from the field. . .

Return of the Muscovy Duck

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The screech of green (olive-throated) parakeets awoke us from our tent signaling that it was time to take our positions on the rocky hillside. We were in the Sierras of Tamaulipas censusing red-crowned (green checked) parrots, a species frequently encountered in captivity but rapidly becoming rarer in the wild. As I sat sipping a cup of instant coffee, a loud "swoose, swoose, swoose" noise increased in intensity from my right. Sounding like the noise created by one of those old planes in the days of the Wright brothers, the

source of the commotion would soon be unveiled. From the corner of my eye I could see a large, nearly totally black duck (although they do have white wing patches and underwing coverts) laboriously approaching. Soon several of these magnificent birds passed. Most were quite lean and flightworthy but one was obviously twice the size of the others and having a bit of trouble keeping aloft.

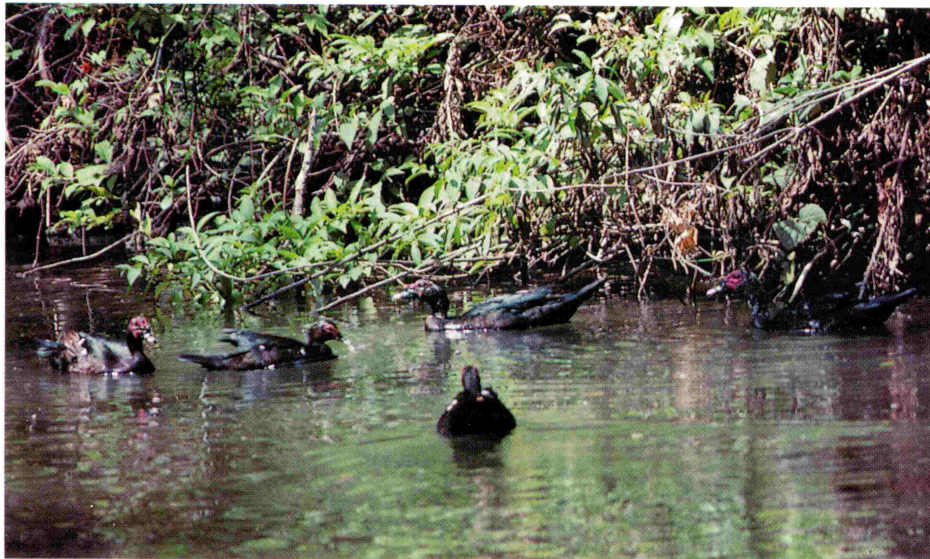
In Mexico they're called Pato Real or royal duck. We commonly refer to them as muscovy ducks (*Cairina mos-*

chata). While the scientific name might suggest hints of Moscow and Cairo, it is most likely derived from Cairu, Brazil as the species inhabits the New World only. The species name "moschata" is believed to be New Latin for "musky" as it was once known as the "musk duck." The muscovy shares the genus with the white-winged duck (*C. scutulata*), an endangered species found in southeast Asia. According to the literature the two join with the Hartlaub's duck to form the subgroup called the greater wood ducks. In the domesticated form the colour can be greatly varied and the caruncles large and quite grotesque. In the wild they are quite different being dark, sparkling with iridescence as a rainbow of colours reflect from their backs. As with the domesticated form, they are no small duck. Males may weigh as much as nine pounds with females being a more petite four pounds. In addition to the marked size difference the males also possess ornate caruncles.

Occurring from south Texas southward through Central America into South America (south to northern Argentina), the duck is considered throughout its range to be a favorite food item. In Mexico the species is making a comeback due to the activities of Ducks Unlimited-Mexico. According to Dr. Eric Gustafson, 2,650 nestboxes have been placed along the Gulf Coast around Yucatan with an additional 3,000 being planned for erection in the near future.

Frequenting slow flowing tropical rivers and swamps, these ducks have been observed also in man-made lakes and in rice plantations throughout Mexico and Belize, Central America. Due to excessive hunting and possible pesticide problems the species was doing poorly in Belize. Recent accounts of the species' increased numbers may be due to the foreclosure of the country's major rice plantation. In Honduras, hunting continues to be a problem for this wary duck although a planned nestbox program may assist the species. Costa Rica's greatest population is stated to be in Guanacaste lagoons. It has, however, also been noted in Santa Rosa National Park, Palo Verde National Park, Finca La Selva, Tortuguero and in the Osa Peninsula including the popular Parque Nacional Corcovado. Except for occasional wandering birds, muscovies are seldom seen in most of Panama due, again, to incessant hunting. Much is the same regarding its status in the remainder of

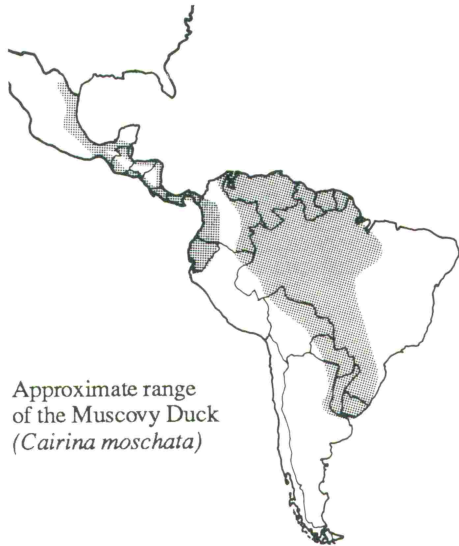
Photos by Jack Clinton-Eitniear



Muscovy ducks (*Cairina moschata*) photographed at the Zoologico Regional Miguel Alvarez Del Toro, Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas-Mexico.



its range although it appears to be doing poorest in Columbia where all wildlife is threatened because of extensive deforestation. The involvement of wildlife organizations in the erection of nestboxes as well as educational programs explaining that if one shoots every last duck there will be no more next year, appear to be the only real hope for the species' survival. It is, however, a difficult task to convince an individual whose family is hungry that he should not shoot that fat muscovy in the nearby river.



Approximate range of the Muscovy Duck (*Cairina moschata*)

With a 35 day incubation period, the muscovy's nest is most frequently encountered in tree hollows. Nests on the ground are less frequently documented. Virtually lacking a pair bond, several females frequently "dump" their eggs into one nest thus creating one large brood. Despite feeding upon small fish, snails, insects, small reptiles, crabs and water plants in the wild state, I have observed milpa farmers with muscovies in with their chickens doing nicely on a diet of insects and cracked corn.

The muscovy duck is an excellent example of how man manipulates organisms to suit his needs. While modern man can hardly be blamed, as the species was domesticated prior to the arrival of the Spaniards by the early Indians of the tropics, we nevertheless continue to breed grotesque looking muscovies with those that have at least a trace of the natural coloration. It is unfortunate that most people will never see what a wild muscovy looks like. Despite this, due to the activities of organizations like Ducks Unlimited-Mexico, the wild, "pure" muscovy will continue to paddle its way up tropical rivers. ●

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