



Domestic Duck Problems in Urban Areas¹

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Background

Florida is home to many domestic and native wild animals. Domestic animals come from wild ancestry and have been raised by people because of their food, clothing, or companionship values. Native wild animals live in close association with the natural environment and only are dependent on people to protect the places where they live.

The most common domestic duck species in Florida is the Muscovy duck. It is native to Central and South America and was first domesticated as a source of food. Early explorers brought Muscovies back to Europe about 500 years ago. Now it is a common barnyard animal in many parts of the world.

Wild Muscovy ducks are glossy black with white wing patches. The bare skin around the base of the bill and eyes often is red. The domesticated Muscovy is much heavier and occurs in a variety of color patterns.

In their native South American habitats, wild Muscovies nest in tree cavities. The larger, domestic varieties have lost this natural trait and normally dig shallow nest depressions in landscaped shrub and flower areas.

Large numbers of domestic ducks can be found in Florida. Individuals, organizations, businesses, and local governments have introduced these birds into many canals and small lakes in urban areas (see Figure 1). Some urban residents and visitors enjoy watching and feeding ducks (Figure 2); however, this form of recreation also has caused problems.

Problems with Unconfined Ducks

Many people consider unconfined domestic ducks a nuisance. Some breeds can be aggressive toward pets and children, deposit droppings where they are not desired, and cause damage to lawns and gardens by their feeding and nesting activities.

Further, ducks lay many eggs, and uncontrolled duck populations can increase dramatically in a short time. In small, urban ponds, high bird densities contribute to reduced water quality that lessens the aesthetic value and presents a potential public health hazard. Each adult duck produces about 1/3lb of manure each day.

Domestic ducks also can transmit diseases to wild waterfowl. All confirmed outbreaks of duck plague in wild ducks have been linked to domestic ducks. Fowl cholera, paratyphoid, avian tuberculosis, and chlamydiosis are other serious diseases that can be transmitted between domestic and wild ducks. Some domestic ducks breed with wild species--which dilutes the natural genes in native wild populations. Resulting hybrids and the altered gene pool are undesirable for the conservation of wild populations.

Laws Protect Domestic and Non-domestic Animals

Laws have been enacted to safeguard our native wildlife heritage from problems caused by domestic animals. Florida Statute 372.265 prohibits the release of animals into the wild that are not native to Florida. The

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purpose of this statute is to protect Florida's native wildlife from disease, destruction, and competition by the release of non-native animals.

Strictly interpreted, this statute requires all domestic animals to be kept in some type of confinement where they cannot wander from the owner's immediate property into wild habitats or public waters. Local laws may prohibit keeping barnyard animals and may require removal if improperly confined or if causing damage or nuisance complaints. Handling domestic duck problems also must follow certain laws. Non-native, non-migratory ducks such as Muscovies are not protected under the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. However, all animals--including pets and barnyard animals--must be treated in a humane manner (FS 828.12).

Methods of Control

Effective control techniques in problem domestic duck situations include:

- Ceasing all feeding programs.
- Repelling birds from the problem area by barking dogs, frequent loud noises, chasing and other harassment methods.
- Flock size can be controlled partially by using one of the following methods*:
 - locating nests, vigorously shaking eggs to render them inviable, and returning the shaken eggs to the nest so that the hen will continue to attempt to incubate them instead of re-nesting.
 - removing viable eggs from nests and replacing with plastic eggs used by the poultry industry to induce laying by young hens. The Muscovy hen may continue to sit on the plastic eggs and consequently will not produce any young.
 - removing all except one or two viable eggs. This will keep the hen occupied with incubating, and hatching these instead of re-nesting and laying another full complement of eggs.

- Humane lethal techniques should be used only as a last resort. Intravenous injection with pentobarbital sodium is a fast-acting, highly effective, and humane lethal technique recommended for small animals by the AVMA Panel on Euthanasia. This drug may be administered by a veterinarian. Local laws may prohibit specific methods or the killing of any birds.
- Relocating and releasing non-native species into the wild is a violation of FS 372.265 and Florida Administrative Code 39-4.005.

*These control techniques are legal ONLY for Muscovy ducks. May NOT be used for mallards or other native species.