

Feathered “Short Lines”

—Kelly Klobber

Stop by many farm implement dealerships and you will find them offering many implement “short lines” along with their regular inventory of red or green or orange farming iron. These “short lines” may include a small grouping of implements for special usages such as grading, mowing, or feeding equipment.

In a similar vein many small farm poultry producers are now finding feathered short lines that fit well with and complement the sales from their egg and/or broiler ventures. They can draw from a myriad of poultry species to have something new or different to sell to regular customers or to draw new buyers to their farms or market stands.

At our local farmers’ market we have a father and son team that are the “pigeon guys,” the “duck lady,” several folks with different varieties of heirloom turkeys, others with guineas in numerous colors, the peafowl man, the old-time breeds guy (me), and several more supplying modest niches with limited numbers of breeding, meat, or other birds.

A few years ago a couple of media celebrities discovered guineas as a natural countermeasure to ticks and thus Lyme disease. With a few mentions on television the noisy little flying bombs became fashionable and those who could produce them in colors and patterns beyond pearl or white found themselves with a hot little sellers’ market.

This market still continues strong for guinea varieties like the Coral Blue or Buff. All guineas are just the same, although colors and patterns can vary. Guineas breed rather seasonally, the eggs require 28 days to hatch, the hens are not the best mothers in inclement weather as they are native only to the more arid areas of Africa, and the little keets should be brooded and tended rather like game bird chicks. The best guinea marketers have established themselves as guinea “professionals” and their sales increase with their ability to present healthy, novel-colored birds and can answer the numerous questions beginners have about basic guinea care.

The heritage turkey is a feathered titan in the food press preceding the end-of-the-year holidays. For many consumers, however, they appear to be too pricey when shipped in from distant producers packed in dry ice. Other consumers



question their ability to cook any turkey that doesn’t have a button that pops out when the turkey is done.

While smaller than the broadbreasted turkey varieties, most heirloom turkey varieties still produce a rather substantial bird at harvest age of 22 to 26 weeks of

age. They can represent an attractive short line to offer consumers who have been buying range broilers and have some experience with handling and cooking more naturally produced poultry meat. They may just buy one or two such birds each holiday season or to center other special meals. This is a true niche market venture. And, yes, a lot has been written about heirloom turkeys being dressed, packed in dry ice, and shipped to consumers for tidy little three-figure sums.

That came about at a time with a much stronger economy and such sales were supported with a rather extensive marketing apparatus. A more apt scenario now is of a family living an hour or less from the producer’s farm and buying 25 to 50 broilers each year and wanting one or two “special” turkeys in that same year.

For such turkeys they will be willing to pay a premium over store prices, but for most that will mean a bird in the \$45.00 to \$65.00 price range. And you are not going to be able to hand those folks a 22- to 26-week-old bird weighing 18 to 25 pounds and just wish them good luck and *bon appetite*. They are going to need help with everything from how to get the feathers off to how to get the stuffing into them. Part of what must be marketed with every item of local food is the local producer’s know-how about his or her production.

A breeding trio or trio and pair of one of the heirloom turkey breeds can produce a lot of poults during the course of a breeding season. A few years ago we hatched 55 poults from a single, young pair of Royal Palm turkeys. This can in no way be a treatise on heritage turkey production, but I can share a few points on fitting in a small number of turkeys into a venture mix:

- A small number of breeding birds will be enough to supply most locally based (within one hour of home) niche markets. Farm-bred and raised are just two more

points that will add value to the marketing of such birds.

- Use just one male in each breeding pen. The competitive nature created by the presence of multiple toms can result in spotty fertility. I like to work turkeys in breeding pairs or trios and believe a trio and a pair may be the near ideal-sized, small-farm turkey breeding venture. Hold back an extra pair or trio as “insurance” against death or injury to the primary breeders.
- An old hog range house can be made into a good housing unit for breeding turkeys. The typical 8’ by 16’ range house with one open side turned away from prevailing winds can be divided in half with a wire panel to house two small breeding groups.
- Seven 54” by 16’ cattle panels can be used to create two pens in front of such a house and securely contain the birds if one wing is kept clipped, especially on the smaller, more-apt-to-fly hens. Or the pens can be topped with shade mesh, concrete enforcing wire, or even other panels. The runs can be given a light covering of straw in wet weather to control dampness and mud.
- These units can be moved to clean ground as needed and are easily taken down and cleaned.
- I like to replace breeding birds after one and no more than two years in the breeding pen. Older toms especially become too large and too awkward and breeding performance can suffer as the birds age.
- Many consider the Narragansett variety to be the best choice for those hoping to produce a line of naturally brooding birds.
- Broadbreasted varieties now are only able to reproduce



Muscovy duck and ducklings

via artificial insemination.

For several weeks each spring there is a fairly brisk demand for ducks at our local farmers’ market. It is, in part, not a demand just for Easter ducklings, but rather people, mostly “rurban” types, wanting a few ducks for their lakes or ponds.

They want ducks primarily with mallard coloring and it can be had in a close

approximation in such breeds as the Rouen, Welsh Harlequin, Khaki Campbell, and Saxony. The Rouen most closely resembles the mallard and though larger by far, the breed is most often seen in hatchery rather than exhibition grade and size. The better grade Rouens are quite massive in size, are very deep sided, and can only successfully mate while on water.

The Khaki Campbell and Welsh Harlequin share a close lineage and have a sort of diluted mallard coloring. The heads on the drakes will be darker and the hens more subdued in their coloring. They are both known to be quite good laying breeds, yearly producing eggs per hen on a par with many of the better egg-producing chicken breeds. And now duck eggs are receiving growing interest in certain types of cooking and baking and especially among certain Asian communities.

The Saxony is a larger breed with a more diluted, mallard-type coloring pattern. With their larger size and fair laying ability they are a good example of a multi-use duck breed. They are best maintained, I believe, in breeding trios. It is perhaps the best way to maintain breeding pens of all of the larger waterfowl varieties.

The Muscovy, the “roosting” duck of the New World, presents us with some unique situations. Recently, some migratory populations of the Muscovy were detected in Texas and raised questions about their status as something

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other than simple, domestic fowl. I also only recently learned that most of us have been mispronouncing their name for decades. The “o” in Muscovy should not be pronounced with the long “oh” sound, but rather with a short “ah” sound, “Muscahvy.”

This is a duck of a very different type, little changed from the wild though being bred in a variety of colors now including blue and chocolate. Most of the other domestic ducks were bred from the wild mallard. The Muscovy has a 35-day incubation period and when crossed with other duck breeds most often produces sterile, hybrid offspring—true “mules.”

The Muscovy is carving out quite a niche as a meat duck with its breast meat often being compared to roast beef. We have observed a strong ethnic demand for this duck at our farmers’ markets. Most favored seems to be the drakes in the most commonly seen black with some white feathers. The white variety seems to be the hardest of the colors to sell on foot.

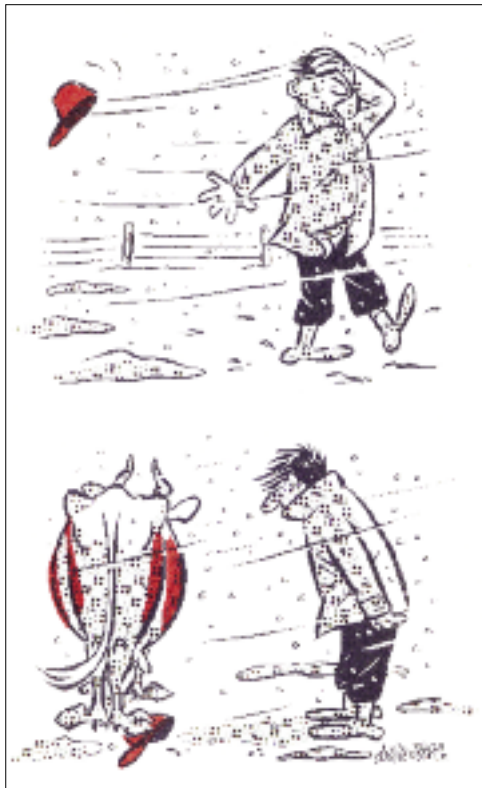
Most believe it best to produce Muscovy ducklings via natural incubation. Despite the 35-day incubation period, many female Muscovies will produce two or three clutches

of young per season. Unless kept separated, two or three Muscovy hens may actually share the same nest including the brooding. The males are much larger than the females who will fly a bit and, while not a pretty duck, they are quite hardy and need very little in the way of special care.

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peafowl, ornamental pheasants, pigeons, game birds, guineas, bantams, and rare and exotic-appearing chicken breeds are drawing interest and generating small lot sales. I recently had three calls in near succession inquiring about pigeon squabs. Apparently squabs are getting more play in the food press.

In some instances there is the novelty factor. Do we really need Chocolate Orpingtons or Lavender Wyandottes? Still, a year ago a friend raised a number of ducklings from a single pair of Ancona ducks, a new breed in his area, and generated \$150.00 in sales from a single pair of ducks in but one season. Prices and demand like that won’t hold up for yearly production in the thousands of birds, but do illustrate what is possible with unique birds targeted to special niches.

Most fowl varieties are really quite prolific, on the low end, some ornamentals and geese producing just 35 to 50 eggs per female per year. With others, production can be huge both from the space needed and the number of birds kept. Corturnix quail females begin laying before eight weeks of age, a pair of pigeons may produce 10 to 12 squabs per year, the laying rate of some duck breeds has been compared to good Leghorn hens, and just 10 chicken hens at 80% fertility will produce 45 chicks a week for weeks on end.

A small flock of Lavender guineas or Buff turkeys or a yard flock of tall, well-bred Black Langshans or dark, mahogany red Rhode Island Reds can often generate sales to those who view them when visiting the farm for other purchases or business. At numerous farm shows I have seen well-bred Buff Orpingtons and Rhode Island Reds stop passersby in their tracks, and curiosity about rarer breeds and varieties such as the Rhode Island white chicken or Red King pigeon can also spark interest and the demand.

These will always be small, niche markets; they will require substantial forethought; new varieties might have to be added from time to time to spark demand; and not every selection will find a market, even a small one. The growing interest in white-laying, heritage chicken breeds will, I believe, bring new interest to everything from Light Brown Leghorns to Hamburgs to Blue Andalusians.

This niche emerges not just from the color of the birds’ feathers or their egg shell color. These breeds lay very well, are vigorous and easy keepers, and though they have been around for generations they are new players in the heritage poultry scene. A further spin on this could come with breeds like the Rosecombed Brown Leghorn, Buff Minorca, Rosecombed Ancona, or Barred Holland. There is always something new that can be going on down in the poultry yard.

Kelly Klobner lives on a diversified farm in Silex, Missouri. He welcomes comments and questions from readers and can generally be reached at 573-485-7261 between 7:00 and 9:00 weekday evenings.