

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF NOVEMBER 1-7, 2017

www.FloridaWeekly.com

Vol. XI, No. 30 • FREE

MISUNDERSTOOD. MISTREATED. MALIGNED. MUSCOVY

Fed by some, abused by others, Muscovy ducks are in Florida to stay

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

“UGLY.” “UNGAINLY.” “A NUISANCE.” “Bullies.” “They defecate prodigiously.” “Not a very interesting species.” “Not that bright.”

“Garbage ducks.” “Lazy.”

These are all ways Florida’s Muscovy duck has been described — even by people who like them — with “ugly” being the most common. On an adult Muscovy duck’s head, especially a male, there are “patches of red bumpy flesh surrounding its beak, eyes and face,” writes Charles Sobczak. “This warty, ungainly face looks as if the duck has just come out of a radioactive enclosure and is suffering from a bizarre mutation.”

They also hiss instead of quack.

INSIDE:

Everything you wanted to know and more about our ugly duck neighbors.

A10 ▶

SEE MUSCOVY, A10 ▶

Ladies Who Lunch strive to help those who are hungry

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

These ladies don’t settle for doing things the conventional way. And that includes fundraising.

They are the Ladies Who Lunch, a group of professional women who meet for lunch once a month in private country clubs throughout Lee and Collier counties. The informal networking group was founded by Kyle Henderson, a life coach for more than seven years, in August 2011.

Since then, their numbers have grown to about 130. “It’s just a lot of really nice

ladies, nice relationships,” said Tami Carr, a mortgage lender who belongs to the group. “It’s networking without feeling like networking. Very casual, informal and fun.”

They do more than lunch. Within their ranks, their activities have expanded to Ladies Who Shop, Ladies Who Bake, Ladies Who Cruise and, every January, Ladies Who Walk.

This last activity refers to the Harry Chapin Food Bank’s biggest fundraiser of

SEE LUNCH, A17 ▶



DONNA VALENTI / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Kyle Henderson and the 2017 trophy for Outstanding Community Supporter of the hunger walk.

INSIDE



A celebration

20 years at Florida Rep. C1 ▶



It's show time

November marks the beginning of antiques season across southern Florida. A29 ▶



Networking

Fort Myers Chamber of Commerce golf classic, Fort Myers Country Club. A34 ▶



Behind the Wheel

The Ford F-150 Raptor can storm the beaches or get you to work. A28 ▶

Download our FREE App today



Available on the iTunes and Android App Store.

PRSR STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
FORT MYERS, FL
PERMIT NO. 715

ROGER WILLIAMS	A2	BUSINESS	A29	CALENDAR	C6-11
OPINION	A4	INVESTING	A31	PUZZLES	C14
HEALTHY LIVING	A24	REAL ESTATE	B1	SOCIETY PHOTOS	C31-33
PETS	A26	ARTS	C1	CUISINE	C35

COUNT ON



KEEPING YOU CONNECTED.



MUSCOVY

From page 1

And yet their strange charm to some is undeniable.

"I want him!" Abigail Murphy, 2½, told her dad, TJ, pointing at a big Muscovy duck who sat on the shore surrounded by more slender and graceful white ibis. Iridescent green feathers shimmered in the sunlight on the duck's back, one of many Muscovy color patterns.

Abigail and TJ, who is 27, often visit the ducks and other wildlife that live in a wide canal behind Bayfront Health hospital in Port Charlotte off Olean Boulevard.

"She's absolutely in love with the ducks," TJ says. "I mean, this is the type of stuff she'll remember."

Nearby, young Muscovy ducks drifted, three dark and one lighter colored. Found mostly in urban areas in Florida in canals, retention ponds in condo complexes or behind Walmarts, in gated communities, on golf courses and farms, they are both abundantly common and little-known, neighbors we haven't cared to get to know.

Native to Central and South America and parts of southern Texas, they are considered a non-native, invasive species by the Florida Wildlife Conservation Commission, although by some accounts they've lived here for hundreds of years. At the least, they've been here since the 1960s. FWC has no population projection but there are thought to be tens of thousands in Florida.

"These birds have escaped captivity or were released illegally for ornamental purposes," FWC's website reads.

Because they are an introduced species, landowners can remove them without a permit, but they can't relocate them on public land. That means they're usually euthanized unless a private landowner or the rare shelter is willing to take them.

Although the ducks are protected under animal cruelty rules, their status as an invasive nuisance makes them vulnerable to mistreatment, said Don Anthony, a spokesperson for the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida in Fort Lauderdale.

"It's an ongoing problem," he said. "There are people who hate these ducks and are just unbelievably brutal and cruel to them ... they not just chase them but kill them. Some people purposely run them over when they see them in the street."

The South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* report-



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

TJ and Abigail Murphy visit Muscovy ducks behind Bayfront Health hospital in Port Charlotte.

ed in 2015 that a trapper was found "bludgeoning mother Muscovies to death" at a condo building in Pembroke Pines. And in Wellington, "a groundskeeper allegedly laughed as he gunned his lawn mower over a flock of 11 ducklings... The landscaper was charged with nine counts of animal cruelty."

Although the ducks pose virtually no threat to human health, according to the Florida Department of Health, it has been suggested that they could spread diseases such as avian flu or duck viral enteritis to other birds. Those cases have rarely been reported. FWC didn't respond to a question asking what specific disease the Muscovy ducks could spread to other wildlife and how that compares to diseases other animals can spread.

The most common complaint about them is that they can breed like crazy in heavily populated areas — especially when people feed them — and then poop on people's driveways, sidewalks and other areas.

The FWC recorded 71 complaints about Muscovy ducks in Palm Beach County between January 2014 and September 2017, the most of any Florida county, followed by Hillsborough County with 43. During that period, there were 20 complaints in Lee, 10 in Collier, and none in Charlotte County.

FWC says the ducks have often divided residents who love them and those who hate "their droppings, property damage and aggressive behavior."

One of the few researchers to begin



COURTESY PHOTO

Most agree that Muscovy ducks are cute when babies.

studying Florida populations of Muscovy ducks, Jacqueline Perry Cahanin graduated in May from the University of South Florida in Tampa with an M.S. in Environmental Science.

"They are kind of lazy," she admits, though she grew fond of them. "... I do like the ducks."

She implores people not to feed them, "or any wildlife."

"They have plenty of food," she said.

Her graduate thesis, "Abundance and Habitat Preferences of Introduced Muscovy Ducks (*Cairina moschata*)" aims to "assist land managers and property owners with habitat modifications in preventing or controlling nuisance Muscovy populations."

Ms. Cahanin's professor and mentor, Joni Firat, specializes in the study of animal movement. Lately that has included Muscovy ducks.

"I quickly learned that they are not well

studied outside their native range," wrote Dr. Firat, associate chair at USF's School of Geosciences. "So, my students and I have been studying Muscovy ducks to learn more about what habitats they use in Florida, as well as how they use them."

She and her students observed individual ducks in the Tampa area to find out how they spend their time.

"We found that they spend most of the daytime in grass (41 percent), followed by ponds and their shorelines (25 percent), under tree and shrub cover (27 percent), and other urban habitats (7 percent)," she wrote. "They also spend the night roosting at the edge of the water or in trees. They feed in a variety of ways: gleaning foods from the ground surface, such as acorns, or insects; dabbling in the water; probing the soil for insects or other foods; grazing grasses and other small plants; and consuming bread and other food items offered by humans."

Dr. Firat (along with the FWC and many others) says people should not feed the ducks, as she has noticed people doing on campus. It can cause their population to explode in a populated area, leading to ducks being trapped and euthanized.

"Although I do not recommend feeding wildlife," she added, "frozen peas are a better option than bread in terms of both duck health and maintaining water quality."

Duck Haven

Eunice Sivertsen, at 80, is Florida's — and perhaps the world's — most dedicated Muscovy duck activist, spokesperson and caretaker. For 41 years, she has run the nonprofit Duck Haven, a shelter for Muscovy ducks at her home in Margate in Broward County.

"I think that the ducks keep me young," she said.

Ms. Sivertsen, who moved to Florida from Long Island, is now caring for about 70 permanently injured and disabled ducks and finds homes for the healthy ones.

"I have blind ones," she said. "One with half a beak. One with one leg..."

She has taken in the ducks from all over South Florida including from residents in Palm Beach County and the CROW clinic on Sanibel Island.

CROW admitted 58 injured Muscovy ducks this year, and 43 last year. The most common injury is being hit by a car.

"Our rehabilitation licenses allow us to treat, but not to release invasive species back into the wild," says Dr. Heather Barron, CROW hospital director. "In the case



"They are kind of lazy ... I do like the ducks."

— Jacqueline Perry Cahanin, Muscovy duck researcher

in the know

Muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*)

>> **Categorized:** The Sunshine State's Muscovy ducks are a feral, domesticated variety. They are generally larger and heavier than their wild counterparts native to Central and South America, Mexico and southern Texas, and their color patterns come in more varieties.

>> **Key features:** Their red heads, which especially in males as they become adult, develop into warty flesh — called caruncles — around their eyes and beaks. Females sometimes lack this feature entirely, and are also typically much smaller than males. They also hiss instead of quack.

>> **Length:** 28 to 34 inches.

>> **Weight:** 5 to 15 pounds.

>> **Lifespan:** Up to 12 years.

>> **Habitat:** All 67 Florida counties. Unlike wild Muscovy ducks, which live mainly in forests, Florida's variety are usually found in urban and suburban areas

such as condo complex ponds, golf courses, city parks and canals, as well as on farms.

>> **Number in Florida:** Unknown. There are said to be tens of thousands.

>> **Diet:** Vegetation, insects, small fish and crustaceans, spiders, worms, handouts from people such as bread.

>> **Predators:** Feral cats, dogs, alligators, raccoons. Water snakes and lizards may eat their eggs. Owls, rats and other predators may feed on chicks.

>> **Breeding:** Prolific. They lay from eight to 16 eggs and breed year-round. The eggs take about a month to incubate.

>> **Background:** The birds are believed to have been brought to Florida at an unknown date, decades or perhaps even centuries ago, escaped, and then formed their own self-sustaining populations. The name "Muscovy" might

be a reference to the Muscovy Company based in London in 1555, which brought the ducks from the Americas to England and France, though it's unclear exactly where their name comes from.

>> **Legal status:** Muscovy ducks are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has issued a Control Order allowing control of the Muscovy ducks and their nests and eggs in areas outside their natural range, including Florida. That allows control of the ducks by landowners, wildlife management agencies, and tenants, agents, or employees without federal or state permits. Florida and federal rules prohibit the release of Muscovy ducks on public lands.

— Sources: FWC; "The Living Gulf Coast" by Charles Sobczak; The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

of young, healthy Muscovy ducks brought to the clinic, we are sometimes able to find permanent homes for them.”

Otherwise, they're euthanized.

Ms. Sivertsen and her veterinarian can restore some injured ducks back to health. She urges people who want ducks removed to call her first before calling a trapper. She has a network of private farms including in West Palm Beach where she is often able to relocate healthy Muscovy ducks.

Ms. Sivertsen started Duck Haven after watching a man drowning baby ducks and beating their mother, she said, in a lake near her home.

Back in Long Island, she and her late husband had raised foster children, she recalled, and when they came to Florida, the ducks felt to her a little bit like that.

“I guess when I moved down here I took a liking to these ducks and I could see how when I would go out to rescue one, people said, ‘they're garbage ducks, they're nuisance ducks,’” she said. “That made it even more of a challenge for me to protect these ducks that so many people disliked.”

Over the years, the Muscovy population, like other animals, increasingly compete for space with people. They've often found themselves the targets of homeowners and condo associations, and other places that typically hire trappers to remove them.

It is illegal to relocate them to public land, and finding private landowners to take in unwanted Muscovy families can be difficult.

Instead, FWC allows “humane” euthanizing of the ducks, by trappers or by residents who find the ducks on their property. That's what usually happens.

Patrick Gibson, owner of Professional Wildlife Removal, said he prefers that the ducks are taken to a private farm. Otherwise they're euthanized, with his preferred method being carbon dioxide poisoning in a cage.

“It's the least torturous method,” he said. The duck “goes in there basically, falls asleep and that's it.”

Noel Hanson, owner of Animal Rangers based in Wellington, does duck removals throughout South Florida.

“Over here they're extremely abundant,” he said. “The biggest problem with them overall is they're very prolific, especially if people are feeding them. The other problem with them is they defecate extensively — much more, so it seems, than other water fowl.”

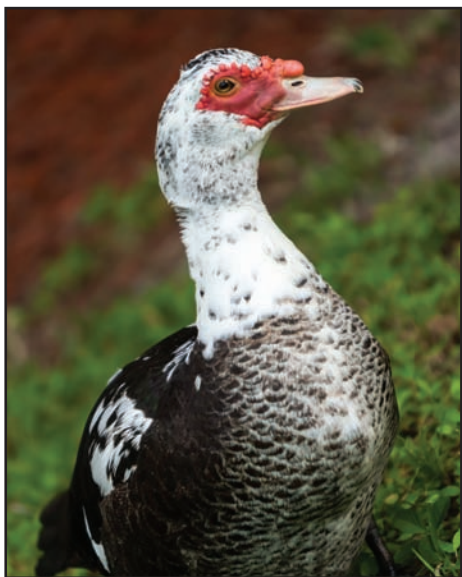
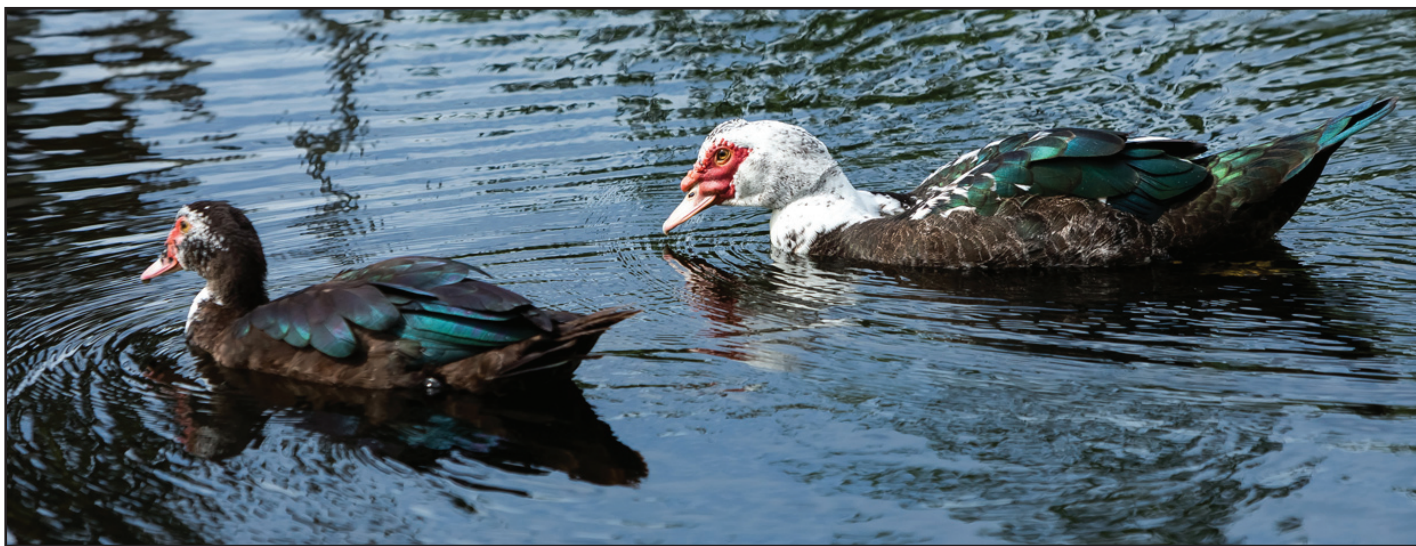
“They're more like chickens and roosters and that's the way I view them. I view Muscovy ducks like as a farm animal, not a wild animal.”

He would not discuss his method of euthanizing because he said it upsets people. The *Sun-Sentinel* reported in 2015 that the wildlife commission's accepted methods of euthanization include carbon dioxide poisoning and pellet guns, as well as “cervical dislocation,” breaking the duck's neck, whether by hand or with a club.



COURTESY PHOTO

Ducks enjoy each other's company at Duck Haven, a shelter for the birds.



VANDY MAJOR / FLORIDA WEEKLY

A Muscovy duck family always seem to be present at all the shows, greenmarkets and events at the Alliance for the Arts in Fort Myers.

Sometimes they are sold to gator farms for food, Ms. Sivertsen said.

One of the biggest misconceptions about Muscovy ducks is that they spread disease to humans. The Florida Department of Health in Lee County emailed this statement:

“No public health agency, including the United States Centers for Disease Control, has any evidence that Muscovy ducks or their droppings present any health threat to human beings. The sole exception is when small children, the elderly and those with immune system problems directly handle newly hatched chicks, then exposure to salmonella can occur.”

Instead of calling trappers who usually euthanize the ducks, Ms. Sivertsen and others recommend controlling populations first by not feeding them. If they are fed, she adds, especially in a residential area, it should be restricted to one location.

People can also remove eggs from their nest and destroy the eggs. There are different methods. Mr. Anthony of the Animal Rights Foundation recommends you wait until the nest is full before taking the eggs or else the mother will lay more to replace the missing ones. USF graduate Ms. Cahanin said you should “addle” the eggs to destroy the embryo and then replace them in the nest.

Having the ducks around is also a way to control other unwanted insects.

“It's very healthy to have a certain number of Muscovy ducks in your neighborhood because they eat roaches, palmetto bugs, mosquitos, all kinds of creatures we really don't want,” Mr. Anthony said. “And if you don't feed them — I've seen them walk through my front yard. They forage for food and they move on.”

The ducks once brought joy to Naples resident Mary Jane Briggs and her grandchildren in her Tall Pines neighborhood — but also a lot of poop in her driveway, she said, “bless their little hearts.”

“It all started when my grandchildren were still young and would come to me after school and of course the mamas would be around the neighborhood with the baby ducks and they wanted to feed them and that started the process, and once you start feeding ducks, that's an ongoing thing.”

Before long, she counted 32 ducks feeding in her driveway every day.

“I loved watching them,” she said. “I loved watching the babies grow up and a lot of the ducks almost became like pets, but then I didn't like dealing with all the aftermath of having all the ducks on my driveway.”

That was nearly seven years ago. Since then they stopped being fed and their numbers dwindled or they went elsewhere.

“I think Mother Nature and the otters that live in the two lakes we have in Tall Pines have taken care of them and the population is quite thin right now,” she said.

Many communities have ordinances prohibiting feeding the ducks. In Lee County, Animal Services has the authority to “declare Muscovy ducks to be a public nuisance” and may “break the eggs and humanely euthanize the ducks” if they are found to be so.

It also reads, “The possession of or feeding of Muscovy ducks on public property and private property zoned residential is hereby prohibited.”

Davie resident Steve Rosen, 66, is an animal rights activist and entrepreneur who insists that the duck's legal status should be changed to “native” so they can be relocated to public lands instead of being euthanized.

They've been here longer than many people who consider themselves native, he points out, and blames their sometimes “nuisance” status on people feeding them.

Mr. Anthony agrees.

“See, we create the problem and then we kill the ducks as if it's their fault,” he said.

Yum yum duck

While Muscovy ducks are known in the culinary world as being quite delicious, Chef Bruce Mattel advises that Florida's free-roaming, feral population are likely not, because of their diet. That could include bugs and flora tainted by polluted water and human handouts or even garbage.

“The one thing I don't think you want to do is indicate to your readers that those ducks will taste good, because they probably won't,” said Chef Mattel, who is senior associate dean for culinary arts at The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

The smaller Pekin duck is the most

popular duck in the professional culinary world, he said, though farm-raised Muscovy ducks can be substituted for most recipes.

Muscovy ducks are also commonly crossbred with Pekins to produce a Mulard duck, used for foie gras.

“Farm-raised Muscovy duck is very delicious,” he said. Compared to Pekin, “They're a little richer, a little more mineral.”

The ducks can be roasted slowly for a very long time, he said. Or, often, the more tender breasts are cooked separately while the tougher legs are braised or prepared with a confit method.

“The breasts have to be served medium rare to rare and sliced thin for optimum palatability,” he said.

Bon Appétit. ■

“It's very healthy to have a certain number of Muscovy ducks in your neighborhood because they eat roaches, palmetto bugs, mosquitos, all kinds of creatures we really don't want.”

— Don Anthony, a spokesperson for the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida in Fort Lauderdale

