

Magpie Ducks Make Great Backyard Birds

Magpie ducks may be rare, but their friendly demeanor and easy-going nature make them a favorite among duck owners worldwide.

These beginner-friendly birds get along well with other duck breeds, as well as chickens and guinea fowl. They owe their name to the distinctive black or blue markings along their backs and heads that resemble a European Magpie.

This breed got its start in the 1800's. Duck breeders believe they're descendants of runner ducks and a Belgium breed known as Huttegem. Duck breeders Oliver Drake and M.C. Gower-Williams are credited with their development, and Magpies entered the British Waterfowl Standards in 1926. The breed made it stateside in 1963 and was first recognized by the American Poultry Association in 1977.

Magpie ducks belong in the "light" class of duck breeds. Adults weigh between 3 to 5 lbs., and the long-bodied birds have broad heads and long orange bills that may turn green with age. Standard colors are black and blue, although some breeders have developed non-standard colors as well. On average, they live between 8 and 12 years.

These ducks are prolific foragers that supplement their feed with grass, insects, seeds, slugs, and snails. In fact, some large livestock farmers keep them around to eliminate liver fluke infestations on their property.

Magpie ducks are known for their pleasant temperament. They aren't easily startled and are friendly companions in a backyard flock. Ducklings tend to imprint on human keepers more intensely than ducks of other breeds.

You don't need special accommodations for these birds. They thrive when provided with clean bedding, constant access to clean water for drinking and swimming, and a duck house with room for foraging. Plan to provide 4 sq. ft. of living space per bird. You don't



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need nesting boxes or perches, as the birds prefer to lay eggs on the ground.

Magpie hens will lay between 220 and 290 eggs each year. They tend to make better mothers than other duck breeds. Most will lay six eggs in a clutch before sitting on them. Even so, most breeders rely on incubators for better results.

While the ducks aren't large, their meat is considered a delicacy in many circles. Expect one bird to feed two to three adults.

It's possible to purchase eggs or ducklings from breeders nationwide. Search for sellers near you through the Livestock Conservancy and Magpie Duck community groups on Facebook and other social media. Plan to pay at least \$15 per duckling, as they're rare.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, The Livestock Conservancy, PO Box 477, 33 Hillsboro St., Pittsboro, N.C. 27312 (www.livestockconservancy.org).



Haslett-Marroquin is raising and selling broilers raised in a free-range/fixed building system.

Tree-Range Chickens Take Flight

Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin is producing, processing, and marketing "tree-range" broilers in a free-range/fixed building system. Instead of open pasture, chickens are raised in fields of plants, bushes and trees.

"I grew up in Guatemala, where chickens are raised in their natural jungle habitat," says

Haslett-Marroquin. "I couldn't find a single place in the U.S. that operated that way. I didn't want to raise them in confinement or with mobile housing in an open pasture. I had to innovate a design."

He started with less than 2 acres of land and began researching options and experimenting

Sewing Machine Quilting Frame

Marian Perron, of Port Royal, Tenn., has modified her hand quilting frame for easy, efficient machine quilting.

"Large quilts became quite cumbersome when trying to fit them through the space between the needle and the body of the sewing machine, known as the throat," says Perron. "Quilting the layers became easier with the introduction of long-arm quilters manufactured especially for home use." These specialty sewing machines have larger throats, allowing more material to pass between the needle and the neck.

In contrast, Perron's machine was not designed with quilting in mind. She explains, "I found myself making many quilt tops on my Juki sewing machine and either tying them off or attempting to tack the layers with sporadic sewing. I decided it was time to 'graduate' to a long-arm machine."

Pricing for a simple frame and carriage starts at around \$600, while more intricate frames and long-arm machines with programable software can run \$25,000 or more. "While I would love a more expensive set-up, I opted to purchase a Grace Co. frame and use my own sewing machine on the carriage," she says. "The carriage had handles that came out under the frame about 18 in. at hip height. I decided I wanted shoulder-height handlebars instead. Aftermarket handles would cost about \$300."

Perron's husband fabricated her handlebars himself from leftover materials from other projects. "Looking at a sewing machine with the needle in front of you (rather than on the right), he made a saddle about 9 in. wide from steel he had in his workshop. He took the metal and curved it to mount on the top of the sewing machine body from left to right. He also bent another 9-in. piece for the



Quilt frames can be used to make sewing on a machine not necessarily designed for quilting easier.

bottom of the saddle and used long bolts to hold the top and bottom pieces together. He added felt between the sewing machine and saddle top and bottom to prevent scratches. He then added perpendicular bars about 13 in. long to support the handles, and I use them to drive the machine. Also, on the handles, I mount my stitch regulator when I choose to use it rather than a foot pedal."

This simple upgrade significantly improves Perron's stability as she stitches her quilts. "The only thing I would add would be bicycle handlebar grips which are molded to fit between fingers," she says.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Marian Perron (ph 802-734-7609).

with scalable concepts. What he came up with over 7 years was a complex system from production to processing to marketing.

In 2020 he and his wife purchased a 75-acre farm near Northfield, Minn., with 29 acres of woods. He began putting his concept into full-scale practice. He planted an additional 8,200 hazelnut bushes and other plants under taller trees and began building out his infrastructure.

He cycles three flocks of 1,500 birds every 10 weeks through the system. The model includes two 3/4-acre, fenced paddocks. A 1,600-sq. ft. coop provides a square foot of space per bird and is situated between the paddocks with exits to each.

To date, Haslett-Marroquin has built three production units with another three in the planning stage. Production in the units launched this spring.

Chicks spend their first 4 weeks inside the coops before teaching them to roam by moving feed and water outside for the next 6 weeks. Once released into a paddock, they naturally return to the building to sleep and for shelter.

"We feed them a core ration of ground feed that's supplemented with a mix of easily sprouted whole grains, as well as anything they forage in the paddock," says Haslett-Marroquin. "The grain is soaked and then spread in an empty paddock where it sits for 2 days, swelling, sprouting, and feeding the biome. Then we turn the birds in to eat it over the next 2 days. It adds water to the birds' guts and gets the most value out of the grain."

Haslett-Marroquin identifies a wide range of advantages to fixed housing over mobile chicken coops. They include being more predator secure with less maintenance and wear as feeders, waterers, and housing are not moving daily. He believes it also reduces stress on the birds from wind and weather and

reduces human labor.

Haslett-Marroquin selected breeds that have strong legs for ranging ability. Heritage breeds take too long to mature, and industrial broilers aren't designed to range.

Haslett-Marroquin uses wood shavings for litter in the building, as they're antimicrobial and absorb ammonia and waste. When they're cleaned out at the end of a flock, they can be spread on land that will produce crops, some of which will feed future flocks.

Early in his R&D, Haslett-Marroquin realized he needed to include processing and marketing, not only for the birds, but eventually for annual harvests of hazelnuts, and other understorey products like elderberries and eventually maple syrup and mature trees for lumber.

Currently, Tree-Range Chickens are marketed through several food co-ops in the Twin Cities and small towns like Northfield. New national accounts are being developed.

"We were able to secure a market for our current production in a very short time, from January to April this year," says Haslett-Marroquin. "We have enough buyers now for significant growth for the next 3 years. We don't sell chickens. We sell a story of a healthy animal, a healthy farm, and happy chickens that are as nutritionally dense as any chicken can be. Consumers are looking for that level of integrity."

For Haslett-Marroquin, Tree-Range broilers are just a first step. He's also working on an egg-laying version, as well as agritourism opportunities for his farm and others in the system.

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