

The Cayuga Black Duck, its Early Years—the Facts.

By Jonathan M. Thompson © February 2009 / Additions May 2014.



Dusky or Black Duck, (*Anas obscura*, in Audubon, 1843)

Writers on the derivation of the Cayuga Duck have, over time, made more or less the same assertions regarding its origin; these are: it is descended from either pure American Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*; *syn. A. obscura*), or is the result of hybrids between that species and the Mallard or some domesticated variety, and it was first held in a captive state by a miller in Dutchess County around 1809. There is evidence to support one portion of this theory, but, mostly, it is an inaccurate assumption; as will be explained.

The Evidence.

John James Audubon, the naturalist and artist, mentions early domestication of the Dusky Duck (*Anas obscura*, of Audubon) as related to him prior to 1843. The text freely interchanges the name “Dusky” and “Black”; the relevant passage is given here, in part:

“My friend, the Reverend Dr. JOHN BACHMAN, assures me that this bird, which some years ago was rather scarce in South Carolina, is now becoming quite abundant in that state . . . After feeding a few weeks on the seeds it becomes fat, juicy, and tender. . . He also informs me that he has known hybrid broods produced by a male of this species and the common domestic Duck; and that he had three of these hybrid females, the eggs of all of which were productive. The young birds were larger than either of their parents, but although they laid eggs in the course of the following spring, not one of these proved impregnated. He further states that he procured three nests of the Dusky Duck in the State of New York.

The young of this species, in the early part of autumn, afford delicious eating, and, in my estimation, are much superior in this respect to the more celebrated Canvass-back Duck. That the species should not before now have been brought into a state of perfect domestication, only indicates our reluctance unnecessarily to augment the comforts which have been so bountifully accorded by Nature to the inhabitants of our happy country.”³

Although no date is assigned to it, the above text is a perfectly acceptable account of early hybridisation between the Dusky/Black Duck and a variety of domestic duck, as known to Dr. Bachman. However, this evidence has never been included by any writers on the history of the Cayuga Duck.

In 1846, the American writer, Richard L. Allen, recommends the “*common black duck*” as being the most profitable for domestic use, as they laid between forty to fifty eggs and sometimes even more, if kept from sitting.¹ There are also accounts of localised races of large black ducks existing in England at around this date.

An article that appears to be the first public announcement of the Cayuga Duck - it does not name its subject and is under the title “Variety of Ducks.” - is found in *The Cultivator*, 1851. This article states the birds bore a striking resemblance to the wild Black Duck and had been bred distinct from any other variety for at least twenty years. Some birds had been obtained in Orange County around the year 1840 by Mr. John S. Clarke and taken to his farm at Throopsville, Cayuga County. Mr. Clarke says of the birds:

“The characteristics of this variety are, nearly a uniform color (a little darker than the wild black-duck), good size, attaining the weight of eight pounds, dressed, at four months old, very quiet and very prolific, one duck laying from 150 to 200 eggs in a season with proper care. There are some in this vicinity which have lately acquired a top-knot, equal to any fowl.”

Luther Tucker, the editor of *The Cultivator*, concludes:

“We have lately received from Mr. Clarke a pair of these ducks which fully answer the above description. The drake has a top-knot in perfection.”¹⁵

The large size of Mr. Clarke’s ducks and the high number of eggs produced by one of them suggests they were not of pure Black Duck lineage, which weigh 2½ to 3 lbs each and produce an average clutch of 10 eggs. The reference to a recently acquired “top-knot,” indicates there had been either an infusion of Crested Duck blood, or Mr. Clarke’s dark-coloured birds were possibly derived from Crested Ducks; in American poultry literature of

1843, the domestic Crested Duck is stated to produce in excess of one hundred eggs in a year, indicating it had been known in America prior that date.⁶

The first mention of the name “Cayuga Black Duck,” that the writer has found, is in 1853, when T. B. Miner wrote he obtained birds from Dr. Eban Wight. How Dr. Wight came by his birds is not stated; he says: “This variety of duck has been bred by Mr. J. S. Clarke, of Cayuga County, N. Y., for near twenty years [which does not exactly correspond with John S. Clarke’s account.], and is undoubtedly a cross between some *wild* variety, and the domestic duck.” Dr. Wight states the breed had been exhibited at the Birmingham (USA) Poultry Show.¹³ There was a breed class for “Black Cayuga Ducks” at the Maryland State Agricultural Society Show held at Baltimore in 1853.¹⁸

In Britain, in 1855, attention was drawn to the Cayuga Duck with the reproduction of Miner’s article (1853) in *The Poultry Chronicle*; in which the contributor refers to the cross mentioned above: “This Black Duck I suspect to be the same as the large variety of the so-called Buenos Ayrean Ducks, and the cross spoken of to refer to the Brazilian Musk Duck.”⁵ Such cross-breeding is possible, but is not a probable factor in establishing a black race of ducks.

Little has been found written about the Cayuga Duck over the following eight years. The editors of *The Cultivator* received “a pair of plump black Cayuga Ducks” from D. L. Halsey, Esq., of Victory, Cayuga County, in 1858.¹⁶

In 1860, Mr. John R. Page of Cayuga County, N.Y., exhibited some “Cayuga Black Ducks,” at the New York State Fair, each weighing 9 lbs. at six months old.¹¹ An article, taken from the *Boston Cultivator*, mentioning Mr. Page and giving the weights of an assortment of his Cayuga Black Ducks, but no specific account of their origin, appears in the English press in 1862.¹⁷

The Report to the US Secretary of Agriculture (1863) contains:

“The State of New York at its later agricultural shows has awarded premiums to a dark-colored strain of ducks called the Black Cayuga. It is claimed that this is a hybrid variety resulting from the pairing of a wild black duck and a common one. . .”¹²

However, the article most often reported as evidence of the Cayuga Duck’s origin is that written by Caleb N. Bement (farmer, agricultural and poultry writer, and promoter of the name “African Goose”), which appeared simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic in October 1863. Bement’s article, the “Cayuga Black Duck—Its History, Origin, &c.,” dated August 17th, 1863, states that little was known about this variety’s origin and assigns the “Wild Duck (*Anas obscuria* [sic])” as the breed’s sole progenitor. Bement claims the species had been domesticated in several locations some fifty years previously and endorses this by giving:

“In the year 1812,” says Dr. Bachman, in a note addressed to Mr. Audubon, “I saw in Dutchess county in the State of New York, at the house of a miller, a fine flock of Ducks, to the number of at least thirty, which from their peculiar appearance struck me as different from any I had before seen among the different varieties of the tame Duck. On inquiry, I was informed that three years before a pair of these Ducks had been captured in the mill-pond. . . One joint of the wing was taken off to prevent their

flying away. . . The family of the miller used them occasionally as food. They considered them equal in flavour to the common Duck, and were easily reared. The old males were more beautiful than any I have examined since, and as yet domestication has produced no variety in their plumage.”

Foot-note: Audubon/Bachman gives *Dutchess county*; whereas in Bement’s transcription *Duchess county* is given.

To this, Bement adds an account received from Mr. Page, in which the *perfect* Cayuga Black Duck is described as being: “black with a white collar or white flecks in neck and breast—rarely black without white.” Mr. Page also supplied the first, known, illustration of the breed (Fig. 2.) clearly showing ‘sex-curls’; whereas the male Dusky/Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*) does not exhibit ‘sex-curls’ as found in the plumage of the male Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and the Mallard’s domesticated descendants. ^{8. & 9.}

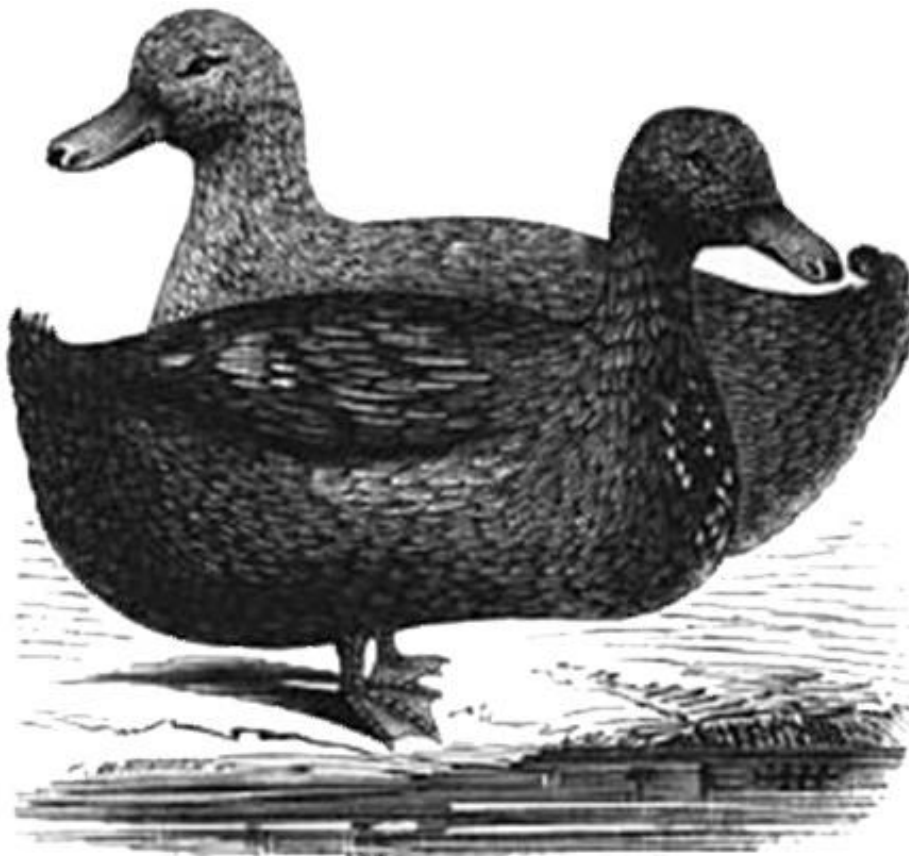


Fig. 2. Cayuga Black Duck, *The Cultivator*, October 1863.

The ducks mentioned in this Bachman/Audubon communication are not named; they are reported to be different from any variety of tame or domestic duck; they are not described as to colour and in plumage they had not deviated from their original form. However, these statements do not refer to the Dusky/Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*; *syn. obscura*). Where Bement could have taken the Bachman/Audubon account of the Dusky/Black Duck’s domestication, he used another Bachman/Audubon letter that refers to the Gadwall Duck (*Anas strepera*). ^{3.}

Bement rectified his error when he wrote an article on ducks in 1867, by omitting the Bachman letter in the text on the Cayuga and placing it in its correct context – in the text on the “*Gadwell* [sic],” - and relating only Mr. Page’s account of the Cayuga Black Duck.¹⁰ (Curiously, the Cayuga Duck is not mentioned in any edition of Bement’s book⁷).

The American Poultry Society published its standard for the Cayuga Duck in 1867.² Lewis Wright states that Cayuga Ducks were sent to him in Britain, from America, in 1871;¹⁹ and the breed first appears in the British Poultry Club Standards in 1874.¹⁴

The Conclusion.

Bement’s ‘evidence,’ in the form of the Bachman/Audubon letter referring to the Gadwall Duck must be disallowed in the history of the Cayuga Black Duck; and the long propounded assumption that the Cayuga Duck originated from pure *Anas rubripes* stock held in captivity from 1809 by a miller in Dutchess County is immediately discredited. If the available written accounts are to be believed, the earliest approximate date that can be ascribed to the emergence of the Cayuga Black Duck is 1830; and possibly from hybrids, as witnessed by Dr. Bachman.

End-note.

In more recent times, papers relating to studies made of the domestic races of ducks in China have been published.

Among the breeds mentioned is the Putian Black Duck (Fig.3.), a breed kept primarily for its production of sooty-coloured eggs and is described as having a greenish-black plumage with a black bill and black feet.

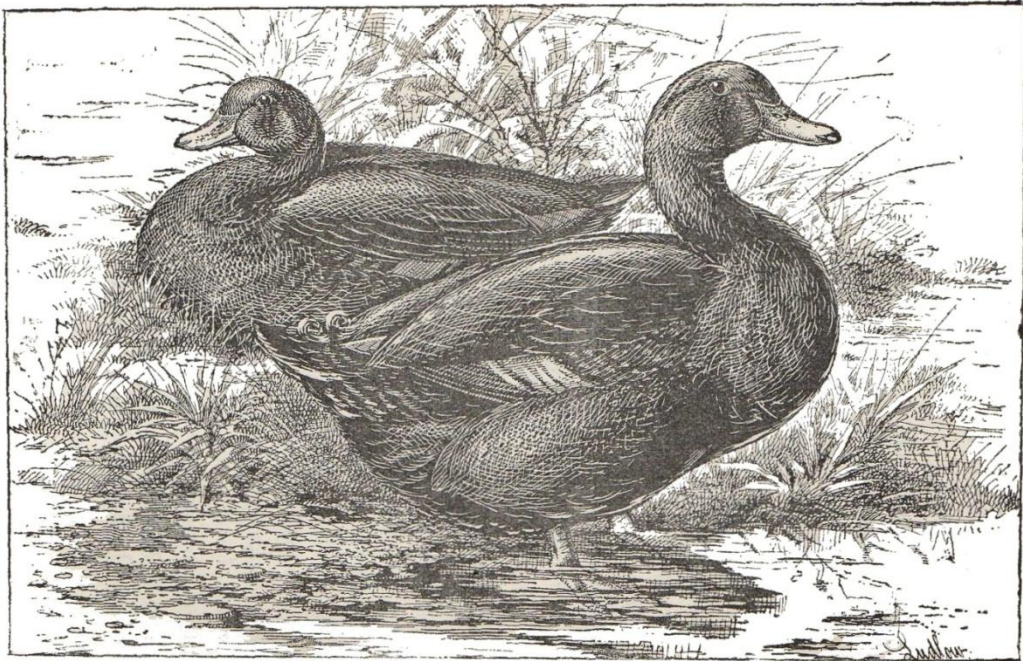
The state of Putian is located in the coastal province of Fujian, almost 400 miles to the east of Hong Kong on the South China Sea.



Fig.3. Putian Black Duck in *Thesis* by Paul Sabatier, Toulouse, 2012.

It is therefore, possible but, to date, not provable, that the Putian Black Duck had been traded to the West after the USA gained access to the trading ports of Hong Kong and Canton (Quangzhou) from 1784, or later, from 1844, when the Treaty of Wanghai opened further Chinese ports to trade. The Mesier's had imported Chinese Geese into America circa 1835 and Fletcher Webster took some home with him after the signing of the Treaty of Wanghai in 1844; it is therefore possible other livestock was also traded at these times.

However, documentary evidence to support an importation has, so far, not come to light.



Pair of Cayugas, winners of first prize at the Dairy Show, and first, Birmingham.
The property of Mr. Fred. Davis.

Fig.4. *How to make £50 per year by keeping ducks*, 1891, contains the Standard as sanctioned by the Waterfowl Club [UK].

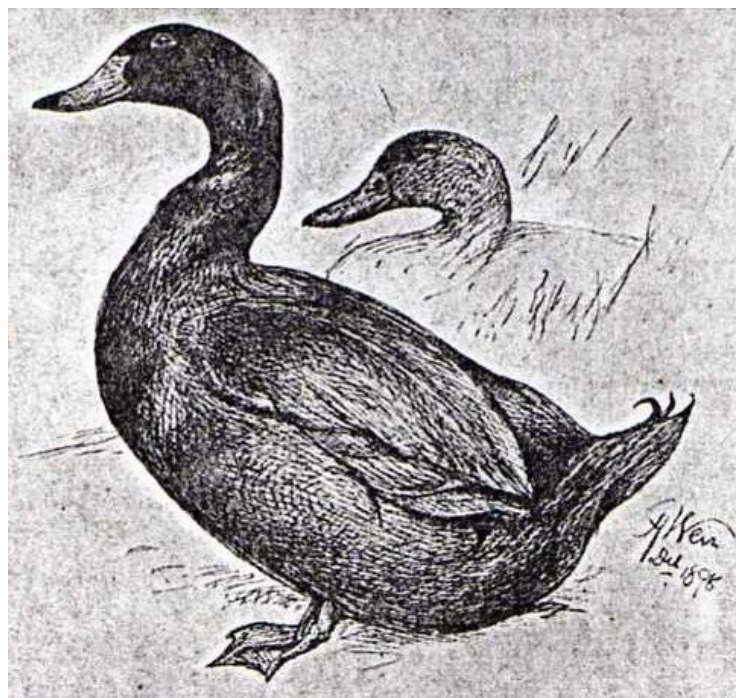


Fig. 5. *Our Poultry*, 1902.

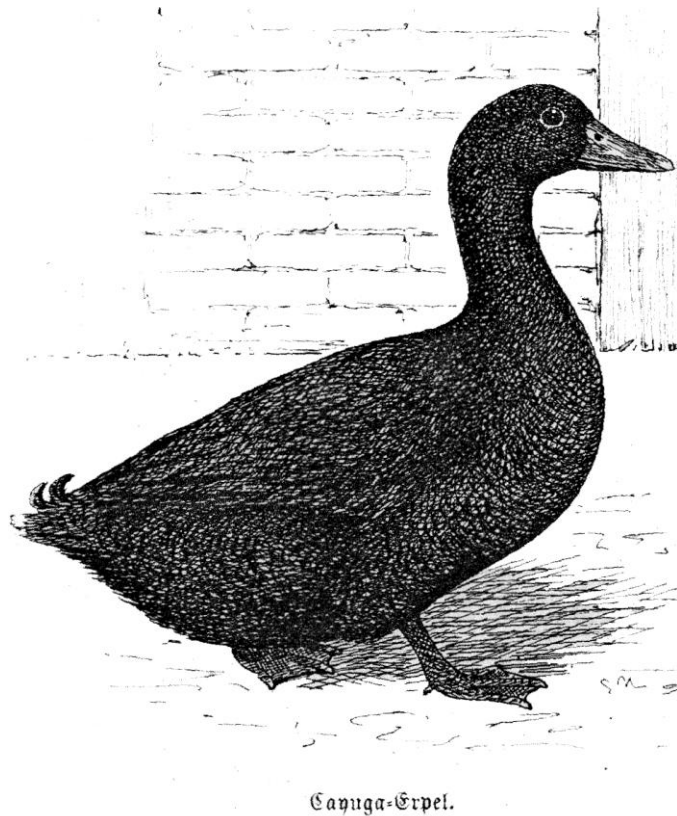


Fig.6. Geflügelzucht 1906.

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