

Migratory duck farming in India



Photo: Author

Migratory duck farming offers benefits for the duck owner, land owners and farm labourers.

G.S. Unnikrishnan Nair

Paddy cultivation and duck farming have always been closely interlinked in the Trivandrum district of Kerala, the southernmost state of India. The ducks are released on paddy fields after harvest, feed on leftover rice grains and in the process enhance soil fertility through their droppings. However, during the last two decades paddy cultivation in the area has substantially decreased because of increased urbanization, changing cropping patterns (whereby rice is gradually replaced by higher value crops such as vegetables and bananas), and migration of young people away from rural areas. This development has forced farmers to purchase feed for the ducks all year round, making duck farming expensive and unsustainable. But “necessity is the mother of invention” and farmers have developed an alternative that enables them to keep duck farming profitable.

Let the march begin!

Many farmers in Punchakkari area of Trivandrum keep duck flocks of 5 000 - 10 000 birds. The ducks, mostly local breeds like *chara* and *chempalli*, are kept for egg production, and are sold or slaughtered at four years of age. Demand for the nutritious duck meat is high and the price is good: It fetches up to 70 Indian rupees (US\$1.61) per kilogram, compared to 50 Indian rupees (US\$1.15) for chicken meat. During part of the year, the ducks used to feed on rice grains on the farmer’s paddy fields and other fields nearby, but confronted with the decreasing areas under paddy cultivation the farmers introduced a system of “migratory duck farming”, which provides benefits to the duck owner, farm labourers and paddy field owners in the district and beyond.

Migratory duck farming depends on the paddy fields of Kerala and the neighbouring state of Tamilnadu, where farmers own large paddy fields and grow up to 3 rice crops a year. By February, as the harvest of the second crop of paddy is over, the duck owner splits the flock into groups of 500 birds each and employs 2 labourers to escort each group. The groups then undertake a long four-month journey that ends in Tamilnadu, covering hundreds of paddy fields on their path. The ducks feed on paddy grains, wild rice, snails and small fishes. During the night they stay on garden lands near the fields and the labourers

keep guard in turns to chase away wild cats and foxes. The land owners receive duck eggs as remuneration. During the journey eggs are also sold to shops and individual households. They are in high demand because they are said to be beneficial for people with diseases such as piles (haemorrhoids). One duck egg fetches an equivalent of US\$0.10. The duck owner pays weekly visits to each group and collects the money obtained from the egg sales. By the end of May, when the fields in Trivandrum are prepared for the first paddy crop, the groups make the return trip home by truck. This allows the labourers to start with their regular field work. Back at the farm the ducks are kept in poultry houses made from locally available materials. Farmers purchase wheat and paddy grains to supplement the ducks’ diet.

Benefits

Migratory duck farming caught full momentum during the 1990s, and is still popular because of the benefits it offers to all parties involved. The duck owners now have two options for selling ducks: They can sell duck meat in their district as before, or they can sell 4-year-old live animals at 60 Indian rupees for a 2 kg duck to large Tamilnadu duck farmers. Farmers generally prefer the latter option because it leaves them with fewer ducks at the end of the trip, which saves transport costs back home. It also saves the labour involved in slaughtering ducks, and enables them to sell large numbers of ducks simultaneously. Part of the sales earnings in Tamilnadu can be reinvested by buying ducklings from the Tamilnadu duck farmers. Additional income is obtained from the sale of duck eggs during the journey. Farm labourers also benefit from the system. They usually work in the paddy fields from May to February, but may find it difficult to find employment during the lean period. By getting involved in migratory duck farming they earn 100 Indian rupees per day during the off-season. The landowners of the paddy fields visited during the journey obtain benefits as well. They receive duck eggs as remuneration for making their land available. They also welcome duck manure that fertilizes fields and gardens. And as for the marching ducks: they enjoy a feast all the way!

G.S. Unnikrishnan Nair. Agricultural officer & farm journalist. Anjana, T.C-25/3175-1, Vanchiyoor, Trivandrum, Kerala, pin-695035, India.
Email: unni_krishnan1@hotmail.com