

THE HISTORY OF DUCK KEEPING IN THE NETHERLANDS

By: Gerrit Arends

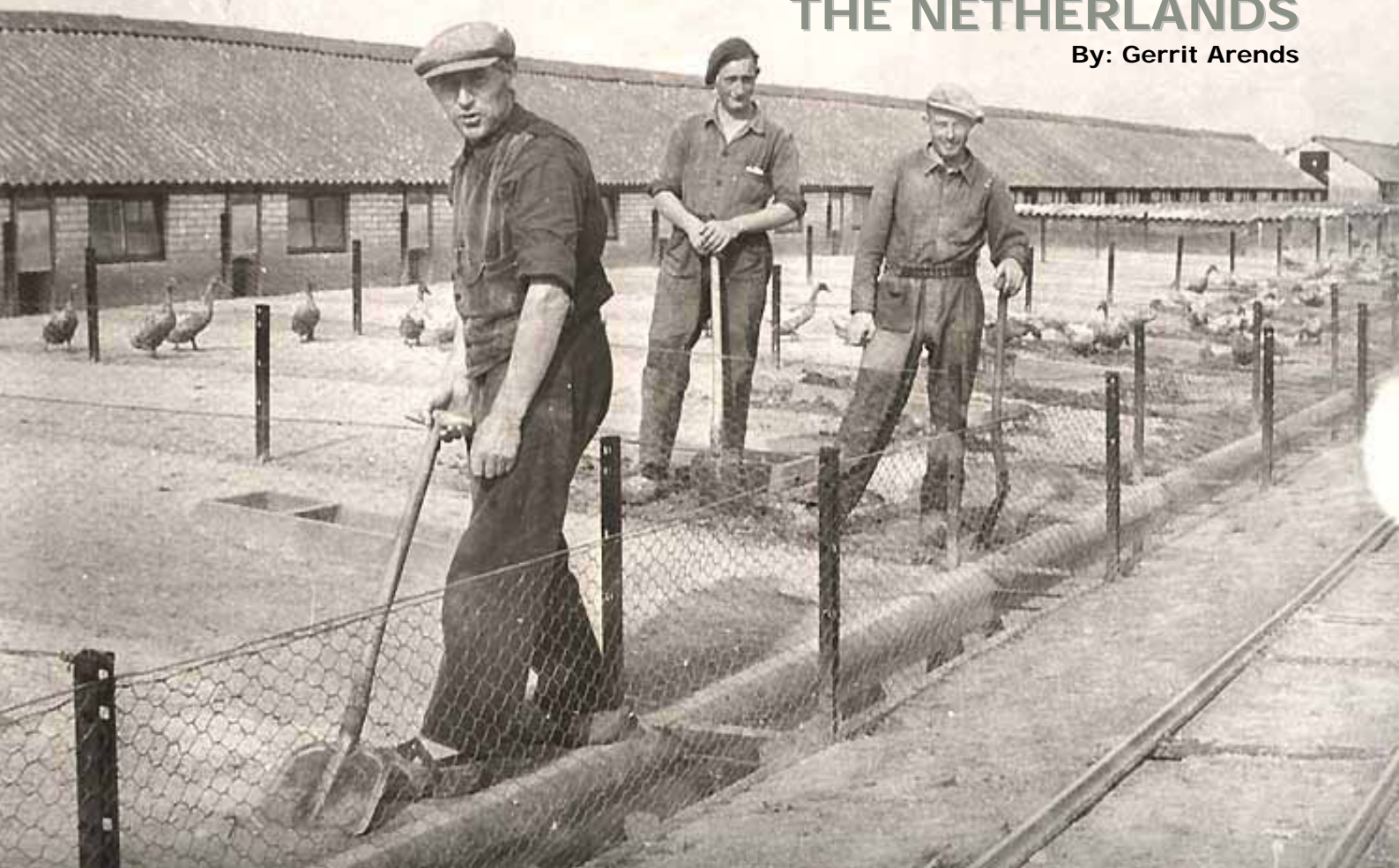


Photo above: Archives Gerrit Arends.

Intro

Keeping ducks as a business is, as always, still being looked on with mixed feelings. This line of business is inextricably bound to a region in Holland called the Veluwe where it, since the Nineteen twenties, provided a lot of employment. Compare it to the "Zuiderzee" fishing industry, out of which this sector of keeping ducks originated. Harderwijk never meant a lot as a fishing village and they tended to look down upon the fishermen, but nowadays a more romantic view has come into existence of the fishing village Harderwijk. It may be possible that in the year 2050 the keeping of ducks will conjure up similar feelings. Because, like the fishery, the keeping of ducks knew its flourishing days, but also very hard times, Fat and Lean years so to speak. It is a unique story because the keeping of ducks for business purposes in Europe was nowhere as significant as in the Veluwe. A story about wilful and stubborn natured people, who always managed to find each other in cooperative structures to protect their common desires, to stay "Master on their own premises".

Case history

Probably the breeding of ducks originated in China, where ducks already were kept far before our era. Also the ancient Egyptians and later the Romans were known to keep ducks in captivity. Only during the past Nineteen hundreds something like 'keeping ducks for a living' started in the province of North Holland. On various farms in the lowlands people started keeping small groups of approximately 15 ducks, who, just like their chickens had to look after themselves as far as food was concerned.

At that time we are talking about the North Holland Hook bill and the White breasted ducks. They wandered in the "polder ditches" during the daytime looking for food and came back at night attracted by the grain they were fed to return to their coops. Next morning,

after having laid their eggs, they were released again. They were used for hunting and in our traditional decoys to attract wild ducks.



Left and Right: North Holland White Breasted duck. Photos: Archives Aviculture Europe.



Left: North Holland Hook Bill duck. Photo: Nico van Wijk.



Edam and Volendam

Keeping ducks as a business for the first time developed well in the surroundings of Edam and Volendam (little towns situated like Harderwijk on the IJsselmeer) at the end the eighteenth century. Waste from the saw-mills in the "Zaanstreek" was used to construct duck coops. In and around the towns coops were built at every ditch.

Nearly every fisherman kept a handful or more of ducks. They were fed on waste of fish and by-catch which was also caught everyday. Hygiene, however, soon became a major problem, but because of the fact that food costs were so low they managed to survive. In the end the contagious diseases meant the end of the business. The diseases such as duck plague spread in no time via the water in the ditches.

Pioneers

It was in the surroundings of Volendam as well where fishermen from Harderwijk got acquainted with the fact that they could keep ducks for a living. So in and around Harderwijk also coops started to show up for ducks, who were also fed on fish, when in 1920 four young men decided to try this business as well. These four, Aalt and Andries Jansen, Hein Volkers and Frans de Lange each bought a plot at the Harderwijkroad in Ermelo, built some coops, bought a group of White breasted ducks and travelled several times a week with a dog cart to Harderwijk to buy some by-catch from the fishermen. **(see photo on the right)**



These pioneers invested in business as professionals and after a few years a booming business was established which would attract the attention of a lot of fishermen.



Left: Indian Runner ducks.
Photo: Nico van Wijk.

Indian Runner

Just like the people from Volendam these four young men also started with the North Holland White breasted ducks and the Hook bills. Soon, however, they discovered the Indian Runner. This Indonesian breed was already widespread in South East Asia, where they were guarded in

already harvested rice fields and could find enough leftovers to survive. The Runner ducks were exported to England around the 1850ties, where they were bred to very good egg layers. These bizarrely built ducks came to a production of 200 eggs a year. Those were amazing numbers in these days. In the best circumstances a good layer chicken would produce a mere 100.

The pioneers understood the business quite rapidly, in 1928 Aalt Jansen had already managed to breed a duck which produced 237 eggs a year.

These ducks produced so well that investments were earned back very quickly. The dog cart was replaced by a much bigger cart with a horse pulling it. They could hire personnel, incubators were purchased and more coops were being built.

Famous breeds

With the Indian Runner's introduction in England at the end of the nineteenth century, keeping ducks had become very popular. By cross breeding this Runner with several known breeds, famous races came into existence such as the Buff Orpington, Welsh Harlequin, Abacot Ranger, Magpie and Large Appleyard Duck; breeds which up until the Second World War provided England with an important part of eggs and meat.

Right: Welsh Harlequin ducks. Photo: Nico van Wijk.



Left: Abacot Ranger and Orpington ducks. Photo: Nico van Wijk.

Today these races are still bred, especially for sport. These ducks have become very popular and for that reason these breeds can still be admired on country estates and in farmyards.



Above: Khaki Campbell duck.
Photo: Nico van Wijk.

Right: A large farm with Khaki Campbell ducks.
Photo: Archives Gerrit Arends.

This Khaki Campbell duck was the reason that the Dutch duck breeding farms - and in particular the one of Aalt Jansen, received international fame. The amazing productivity of this duck was even increased by means of strict breeding policy and careful selection. The ducks were kept individually, in separate cages and each day it was accurately

registered if an egg had been laid. Within a few years they had created ducks that laid 250 to 300 eggs. The Khaki colour would soon drive away the multi colouring of the former breeds. From then on the Khaki Campbell duck dominated the breeding farms.



Fishermen are reason for amazing flight in this industrial branch

The energetic approach of the four Pioneers was very successful for them. Very soon they produced starter material for oncoming duck farmers. Most of them were fishermen who realised there was more to earn by keeping ducks than to keep on fishing in the Zuiderzee, a business slowly ending. New areas for keeping ducks were pointed out. The village of Tonsel became the centre of the duck industrial branch. At the same time also the drift sand area around the Parallel Road was registered as duck keeping area, which because of this sand surface later turned out to be an outstanding place for keeping layer ducks. Heiman Jansen was to settle down here, successors were his sons Johan and Evert Jansen. (Much later Johan Jansen would become my father in law).



Between 1930 and 1940 the Dutch were exposed to an enormous economic crisis. Vast unemployment was the consequence. The duck breeders however, suffered little, better said stayed very prosperous.

Left: Duck farm in Tonsel. Photo: Archives Gerrit Arends.

Mammoth concern

It is hard to make an estimate of the pre war egg production. The ministry of agriculture assumes a number of

approximately 800.000 layer ducks in the last years before the war. Probably this number was higher, simply because of the fact that the former fishermen hardly enjoyed paying taxes (they never had as a fisherman either). The harbour, in those days, was filled with ships and people from Bunschoten, Marken, Elburg, Volendam and Harderwijk to supply the duck keepers with 'by-catch'.

In those years the concern of the Jansen firm developed to a - for those days - Mammoth business with 50.000 layer ducks.



Left: The boats of the Harderwijk fishers. Photo: Archives Gerrit Arends.

Entrepreneurs

It remains astounding that the business of keeping ducks turned out to be so prosperous in about 10 years. After all, the people who kept the ducks were mostly unskilled fishermen without any agricultural background. There are however a number of reasons for the success to point out:

*The Zuiderzee was brackish rich with "by-catch" (shrimps, smelt

and other small fish).

So prices were low and unlimited amounts could be offered.

*The high production of eggs in comparison to the production of chicken eggs.

*The egg prices were high because of the fact that Germany and England demanded a lot of them.

*Having many and cheap personnel made it possible to start big and efficient concerns.

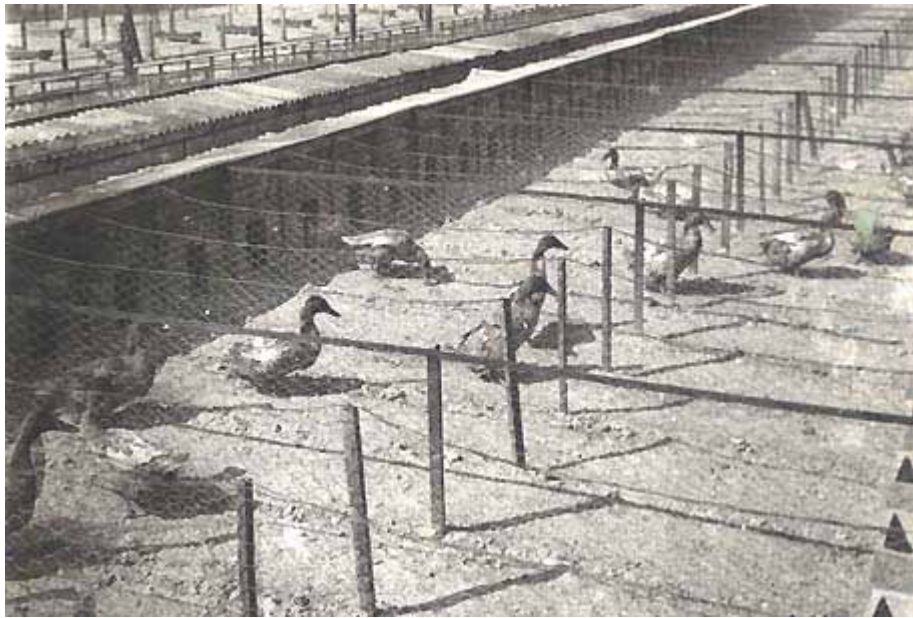
*The system with the cheap long barns and drinking gutters on either side - worldwide known as the "Dutch System"- turned out to be the ideal system for keeping layer ducks.

*Among these fishermen were a number of very good entrepreneurs who were willing to take the necessary risks.

Photos on this page:
Archives Gerrit Arends.

Just in time

It was evident that, with the Belgian Kamp gone after the first World War, Harderwijk was in danger of having to deal with serious economical problems. The duck industry therefore came just in time. During the golden years from 1925 until 1937 many profit by the sector, in which a lot of money was turned over. First of course the fishermen. The tremendous amount of by-catch, which had to be supplied, made it possible that the fleet remained intact until the second World War, as was not the case in other fishing villages where the number of boats had to decrease after the closing of the Zuiderzee from open water, the North Sea.



In easier circumstances

The cement works and building trade were doing booming business, because with what was earned within a year with one duck coop, a next one could often be built the following year. This way - for those days - big agricultural concerns developed and offered work to a lot of people. Also the trades people suddenly had customers who were better off with more money to spend. A few years before, people still had to turn round every penny, but now the former fishermen soon landed into easier circumstances, something which was very noticeable on Thursdays after the public sale /auction of eggs. While the men enjoyed a couple of drinks and a big cigar, discussing the merchandise of the day the wives went grocery shopping.



Decay

As in every line of industry, because of fast growth, also in the duck industry came a decline. The construction of Germany's War industry weakened its economy terribly and it stopped them, as of 1937, from buying duck eggs. From that moment on nearly all the eggs went to England.

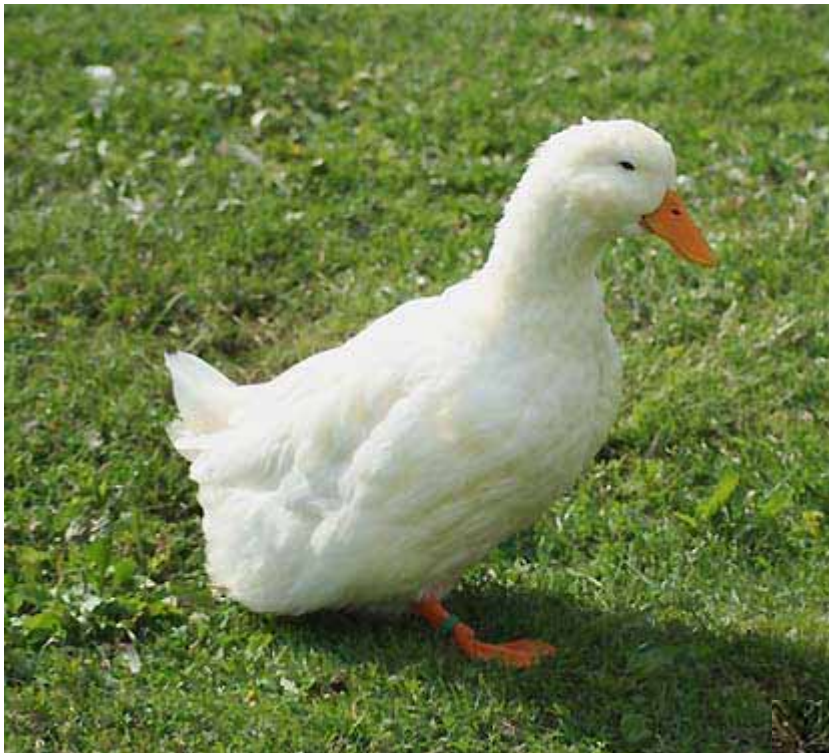
In our own country, unfortunately, all duck eggs had to have a stamp on them saying that they should be cooked for at least 10 minutes.

In 1939 the decay became even worse by lesser and lesser supply of by-catch. Dried shrimps, fish meal and corn were used as substitute, but that meant a considerable increase in food costs. Then, it also occurred that a considerable amount of duck concerns had, in their enthusiasm, gone a bit too far. However, before these concerns were met, something else happened, World War two broke out.

Years during the war

After the German invasion the "duck farmers", who were called up for the mobilization, soon returned from the Front. In the summer of 1940 the Government Office for distributing Food during Wartimes decided to decrease the Poultry Stock to one third. The large concerns suffered especially. They still managed reasonably until 1941, which is what we discovered from their financial management. The explanation for that, I think, must be found in the fact that ducks can survive on fish and therefore were not dependent on the ever diminishing grain/wheat.

Still, since fish became scarce as well, the egg production ceased during the course of the War. The coops only still gave shelter to hiders of War. Weeds were growing merrily on the premises of the concerns because of all the years of intensive manuring. Several duck owners took up their old profession as fisherman again so at least some money would come in. An arrangement was set up so that only acknowledged concerns who were situated in Tonsel could receive a little feed. This way they hoped that they could save their famous breeding lines, so the poultry industry would be able to recover soon after the War.



**Left: German Pekin duck.
Below right: White Indian
Runner.
Photos: Nico van Wijk.**

Pekin duck offers new perspective

After the War, many of the duck farmers thought that everything would turn out the same way as before the War. More fishermen than ever before started with ducks, but also the regular farmers from surrounding areas thought it a golden opportunity to make a living. However, there were two problems. During the first years of rebuilding we had

300.000 poultry farms who tried to earn a little extra with their chickens. In the first post-war years it was difficult to obtain grain. The result was a severe cut on distributing food and an enduring result on egg sale. Duck eggs ended up in the NIVE biscuit industry in Holland and the spaghetti industry in Italy.

In our country the duck eggs still had to be cooked for 10 minutes for normal consumption. Although they succeeded in creating a germ-free egg inside the shell and - in cooperation with the NIVE - also succeeded in creating a pasteurised egg powder, it did not save the case. Production slowly went down. The battle with the layer chickens was definitely lost. The duck farmers realised that something needed to be done if they also wanted to keep an income from duck egg farming.





Above: White Campbell ducks. The white utility Campbells often had a flesh coloured beak. Photo courtesy Geoff and Sue Chase (UK).

The son of one of the pioneers, F.A. de Lange, seemed to have the solution to the problem: the Pekin Duck. The future for duck farms could be found in keeping the ducks for their meat. During the changing of the century they were already very busy with large projects for this purpose in America and later also in Germany; in Holland however we had not anticipated this area. The Germans and the Americans crossed different breeds to create a large meat duck. Of course these ducks were not as productive in laying eggs.

The Dutch however wavered between the layer and the meat duck, so decided to aim for a double purpose duck. By crossing white Campbell ducks with white Indian Runners a typical Dutch Pekin duck came to make its entrance. This duck, weighing more than 2 kilos also laid between 150 to 200 eggs a year. An extra fortune with this ducks were their white down feathers, which were extremely useful for filling pillows.



Left: White utility ducks. Photo: Archives Gerrit Arends.

Kortlang Ltd

Gradually the keeping of the Khaki Campbell ducks disappeared; a chapter was closed at this point. However not entirely. One owner of this particular kind of duck, Mr F. Kortlang went to England in the late fifties. In this country with its long tradition of breeding he installed an enterprise (Kortlang Ltd) which became famous as stock breeder of utility Khaki Campbell.

The duck, with which he became famous is called the Kortlang Khaki Campbell and according to the insiders this duck truly resembles the duck that was the most popular in Holland during the thirties.



Left: Utility Khaki Campbell ducklings in England.
Photo: Denise Moss.

VSE

To sell young ducks for meat was very difficult during the first years. New markets had to be found and finally were found in West-Germany. In 1961 the cooperation VSE, founded in 1952 with 50 working duck farmers as members, succeeded in increasing the production from 400 to 20,000 ducks a day.

And again it went well in the business of keeping ducks. They earned reasonably well with the Pekin duck. Harderwijk and Ermelo even had 3 factories producing poultry feed at that time: named Jansen Feed

(descendants of the Pioneers), Gardenbroek and the Veluwe Grainmarket.

Right: White Pekin duck.
Photo: Nico van Wijk.

Future, as so often, uncertain

At the beginning of the sixties approximately 150 duck farms still existed in The Netherlands, not only in the areas surrounding Ermelo and Harderwijk, but also in other regions such as the Achterhoek and North Brabant. A new period of reorganization took place in 1963, when prices decreased dramatically and supplies increased. An extra complication was the fact that wages increased very fast during this period. Personnel left for better paid jobs in industry and jobs offered by the government. Just like other agricultural concerns it appeared impossible to keep ducks with personnel. Many of them gave up.



The seventies were also very hard for the duck farmers. Prices were low, competition with the German market, especially the East German market, was hectic. The end of the business seemed in sight. The municipality of Harderwijk developed plans to build houses on the duck farmers' premises. Resistance by the former fishermen was just as tough as when they decided to shut off the Zuiderzee. In the end the municipality council agreed with a small plan 'Frankrijk', which meant that duck concerns could survive. If the municipality had continued their original plan the duck industry would have vanished.

Reorganization

After 1980, there were some new developments. Because they had to be able to deliver all year round, ducks were more and more kept inside, a development which was reinforced by the government. This in the end led to the fact that many of them stopped keeping ducks. The enormous investments together with the declining rights for duck farmers, forced many of them to make this decision. Yet the sector did grow a little during the next 15 years. Better management in the slaughterhouses, increasing quality of the Dutch Pekin duck and more and better markets to sell saw to it that there was a little bit of stretch left in the sector. New duck farmers introduced themselves. They can be divided into two groups: Agricultural farmers from the "polders" who wanted to extend their concern with a coop for ducks and Chicken farmers from the Gelders Valley who wanted to reconstruct their old sheds for ducks.



Left: In 1995 my father, J. Arends, received a Royal decoration, given to him by Mayor de Groot. He had worked for the VSE for more than 40 years. Health of the ducks was his ultimate goal. He was the source of information for the duck farmers and a professional in this field. The Lab was his holy place within the concern. After his retirement he stayed closely connected with the 'keeping of ducks' and the VSE.

Right: A. Tomassen's concern, started from a simple poulterers concern, now it is a slaughterhouse annex stockbreeding farm (situated on the former concern owned by the Jansen firm). It produces one and a half million ducks a year. This concern is the main supplier of Pekin ducks for Chinese restaurants in The Netherlands. Photo: thanks to Tomassen BV www.tomassen.com



To conclude

In spite of all the changes during the past years nothing has really changed that much. Good and bad years took their turns; actually, during the ample 80 years it was never any different. Like so many times in the past the sector again is under pressure and the future is uncertain. In Harderwijk there are only 3 duck farmers left, in Ermelo only 1. Most of the concerns are now situated in the neighbourhood of Lunteren. Duck farming today means taking care of ducks for a period of 7 weeks, after which they are big enough for the slaughter house.



As of 2008 World Market prices have risen dramatically, so feed has risen twice in price as opposed to a few years ago. Just as with the setbacks in the past, the duck farmers again will have to show some resilience, like they had to go through many trials during the past years.

Let's assume that Ermelo and Harderwijk will not yet be rid of the duck farmers, at least not in the near future. Is that a pity? Well perhaps for some people but not for others. It is a unique branch which together with allied business has provided good employment during so many years.

Left: Dutch Hook Bill duck.

Photo: Nico van Wijk.



The Dutch Hook Bill ducks (photo above left) and White breasted duck, (photo left) Indian Runner, Khaki Campbell and other named breeds, are still around in The Netherlands, but only as a sport and as ornamental ducks to admire. In this way the fanciers see to it that these old breeds are saved for the future.

Left: White breasted duck.

Photo: Nico van Wijk.

Right: The 'Dutch' Pekin duck.
Photo courtesy Fa. Tomassen.

Note from the editor:

With our thanks to Gerrit Arends, who was, until 2004, very much involved with duck keeping and now spends all his time with Koi Carp sport and everything that has to do with those fish. Do visit his website:

www.koieagle.nl

