

Cereopsis Geese

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Cereopsis or Cape Barren Geese, which are native to the uninhabited, wind-swept islands lying off the southern coast of Australia and the southern coast of that continent, are popular with breeders who do not have a pond or lake because the geese do not need a lot of water in which to breed. In the wild, they only enter the water if injured or to escape from being attacked. Today the birds are protected by the Australian government, but they were formerly persecuted because their grazing reduced the amount of vegetation available for sheep. The birds were first introduced into captivity in 1831 when a pair was given to the King of England who kept them at Windsor Castle where they were bred.

In the past, few Americans were unable to raise young Cereopsis because they were inbred. In the mid 1970's, the American Game Breeders' Federation and the Game Bird Research and Preservation Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, imported wild-caught goslings. Those imported birds started reproducing in 1980 when they were three years old. Today a breeder who buys a pair of Cape Barren Geese is more likely to raise some young because of the efforts of these two groups to introduce some different bloodlines to the birds in captivity in North America.

Among ornithologists, there are disagreements as to how to classify the species. Jean Delacour, the great French ornithologist, classified them as sheldgeese, but other ornithologists, notably Paul A. Johnsgard, have argued that Cereopsis make up a primitive tribe of geese containing no other living species.

Males and females are identical in appearance, but the goose will be slightly smaller in size than the gander. They are large upright geese with ashy gray plumage with a white spot on the crown, or the top of the head. The tips of the primaries and the secondaries are also white. Black almost heart-like spots are found on the tertiaries and the wing coverts. Their short bill is yellowish green except for the nail and the cutting edge. The name "Cereopsis" comes from the word cere which refers to the fleshy enlargement which covers the upper part of the bill. The legs may range in color from purplish-pink to deep purplish-red. The feet are black with long toes or claws which seem to be an adaptation for their living and breeding on land. Young birds will be lighter in color and have heavier spotting than adult birds. Their legs will be lead-gray in color before turning greenish-gray. The sound the gander makes is usually high-pitched and loud. The low, grunting sound which can be made by both the male and the female, but mainly by the female, earned them the nickname "pig geese" in Australia.

Cape Barren are usually kept in pairs and away from other waterfowl. I have heard conflicting stories regarding their belligerent temperament. Breeders have reported that they were bitten or beaten by the wings of the gander. One breeder reported that his Cape Barren gander had killed an adult Black Swan. George A. Allen III of the Game Bird Research Center state in an article published in the May, 1981, Gazette that none of the imported Cape Barren were aggressive towards people or other birds.

The geese need to be kept in an area where there is lots of vegetation for their bill is designed for grazing. According to Johnsgard, about two-thirds of the food consumed by Cape Barren in the wild are grasses. The geese will also eat chopped apples, lettuce, and other produce as well as prepared game bird pellets and grains. They are hardy birds and do not need much protection during the winter. If they are given plenty of hay or straw and a windbreak, the birds are able to stay outdoors in their pen and survive.

Cereopsis do not begin breeding until they are at least three years old. Some breeders claim that breeders must be given "artificial rain" in order for the birds to reproduce, but there are also breeders who raise Cereopsis every year without "artificial rain". Neither sex readily accepts a new or different mate if for some reason a mate needs to be replaced. The geese do not require a lot of water to breed

and are capable of breeding on land. Unlike other geese, Cape Barren do not engage in head-dipping movements. Prior to breeding, the gander walks around the goose pecking at her back as if to push her to the ground. When she is lying on the ground, he walks around her several more times before flapping his wings and mounting her. Breeding is followed by mutual calling. The normal laying season lasts from November to April. In the wild, nests often consist of a mound of gathered vegetation with a hollowed out area on the top in which the hen lays her eggs. In captivity, hens will lay in simple nests on the ground having some natural cover, or they will lay in nest boxes shaped like a kennel or wigwam. Since they lay in winter, a closed nest box to which a deep layer of hay or straw has been added offers better protection against frozen eggs. The average clutch is four almost white eggs. Hens related to the stock imported in the '70's will lay a clutch of five or six eggs. The incubation period is 35 days.

Cereopsis goslings, if hatched by the mother during winter months, should be artificially brooded unless one lives in an area with more temperate winter temperatures. Goslings can be started on low-protein crumbles and some finely chopped greens. Small cracked grains can be added to their diet when they are about two to three weeks old. When the weather is warmer and sunny, they can be put outside in the day time when they are feathered out.

Cereopsis in spite of their faults - having a mind of their own, beating their wings against one's leg so that it hurts long after the beating, or having one's jeans torn by the sharp claw-like nails - are fascinating to many breeders who look upon the geese as **the one species** to breed.

References

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