

# WHAT IS CRUSTY DUCK HEAD?

By KJ Theodore



It's unsightly, it's crusty, it destroys feathers, and it's sticky when wet – what IS that stuff?

Oh-No! It's 'DIRTY DUCK' SALIVA!

You've seen it, I'm sure. Your best show bird has a head of feathers that looks like he's having a 'bad hair day'. Tiny feathers are sticking out every which way, and his eyes are all goopy (is that a technical term?) with a crust around the outer edge. His eyes may also be watering, and when you run your hand over the top of his head, it feels crusty and even sticky if you wet it.

Every duck that gets bred (yes – including drakes on drakes and ducks on ducks – Oh my!) ends up with a deposit of saliva and bacteria on its head from the breeding duck or drake. The breeding bird grabs a hold of the bred bird by the head feathers while it is trying to mount and balance on the other bird's back. While holding onto those feathers with its bill, the breeding bird leaves saliva deposits on top of the head, around the eyes, and anywhere else that gravity takes it, of the bird it is trying to breed.

Once deposited, the saliva not only dispenses bacteria to any area it touches, but it also dries to a crusty and somewhat crystallized material and stays put unless someone washes the poor bird's head. In some cases, a duck will bathe in a sufficient way in order to eliminate the saliva, but since it is somewhat sticky, it doesn't always come off with a simple splash of water and a preening effort on the duck's part.

In many cases, the bred duck will end up with an eye infection as a result. And sometimes the eyes will become 'glued' shut. This would be an extreme case, but I've seen it.

If your duck gets to the point where you believe that you have an eye infection in addition to the sticky feathers, then I recommend that you try and get some ophthalmic antibiotic eye drops or ointment from your local Vet. Treat according to his direction.

As far as the goopy mess is concerned, I would begin by gently washing off the duck's head with warm water and a little No-Tears Baby Shampoo. Let it soak a little before trying to remove the crusty area around the eyes. 'Gentle' is the key word here. Always be conscious of where the ducks ears are and try not to force moisture or soap into them. Rinse clear and scrape off any remaining cru stations from the head feathers with your finger nail and smooth the duck's head feathers with a soft towel while the feathers are still wet. Subsequent preening by the duck will usually get the head feathers put back in place for a smooth look when dried. You may experience some feather damage, since the saliva appears to have a corrosive affect on feather. You may notice a small bald area around the duck's eye after removing the debris, but those fine feathers will grow back in once you've eliminated the saliva buildup from occurring in the first place.

A very effective way to prevent this problem is to keep your breeding down if possible, and to provide clean bath water that contains 7-15 drops of Oxine per gallon of water. The Oxine will keep the bacteria level down in the water, and will also serve as a better eyewash than dirty bath water. The Oxine will not hurt the ducks' eyes, and is probably beneficial. Oxine treated water at the prescribed dilution above is safe for your birds to drink, and in fact, is EPA approved for the use in drinking water for all poultry and livestock. You could even use Oxine to treat your drinking water and still claim organically grown, under EPA approval.

## Breed Type

