



## PRODUCER PROFILES:

### Mel Wiens

*By Tim King*

*Whole Farm Cooperative Correspondent*

STAPLES, MN - When Mel Wiens was a child, his family raised ducks on their farm near Mountain Lake, Minnesota. His family is Ukranian in origin and rural Ukranians always keep a few ducks.

“We visited the Ukraine a few years ago,” Mel said. “I was happy to see that the farmers still have ducks.”



Mel's Pekin ducks. Photo by Jan King.

Mel's childhood also included a fellow who raised ducks for sale.

“He had three hundred ducks,” he recalls. “He was the biggest duck farmer in the area. I was fascinated and wondered why he did that.”

When Mel retired from working as the research plots coordinator at the University of Minnesota's research station in Staples in 2001, he still carried that big duck farmer memory. In his retirement he dreamed grandly of becoming the biggest duck farmer in Central Minnesota.

Duck farming falls below the radar of the United States Department of Agriculture farm census takers so it's not clear if Mel ever met his goal. But since 2001 he has raised a lot of ducks. He's also learned that what looked easy when he was a child is actually full of challenges, difficulties, and pit falls.

Mel started his duck farming project with Pekin ducks. Those are the classic white barn yard ducks. Aunt Jemima Puddle Duck, of Beatrice Potter renown, was likely a Pekin. Pekin ducks are fussy eaters. If a duck farmer doesn't have a pond covered with green duck weed, Pekins eat only corn, according to Mel. Mel doesn't have such a pond. Mel's Pekins don't eat grass, weeds, or much of anything but corn. So, Mel soaks whole kernels of bright yellow corn in water to make them more digestible to the ducks.

The fact that Pekins prefer corn doesn't appear to be a problem to the casual observer. But it's part of a web of the above mentioned pit falls that makes profitable duck farming very challenging.

“I get my ducklings in March,” Mel said. “That way they have their feathers when the warm weather comes. You should never get small ducks in June or July.”

Ducklings without feather covering their ears during the warm weather months get bugs in their ears.

“Those insects will kill them,” he said.

Mel knows this because he’s seen the death toll from these bugs. You can lose up to half of your ducklings.

So, the wise duck farmer gets ducklings in March. They, like baby chicks, come in boxes to the local post office. By the time the ear insects are looking for delicate baby duck ears, those March duckling have a nice feathery protective shield over their ears. So, fine?

Not quite!

“You need to wait at least fifteen weeks before you can butcher a duck,” Mel said.

A duck, born in March, will be fifteen weeks old in July. That July duck will also have an ample supply of pin feathers. Pin feathers are new feathers that the duck is growing in preparation for the winter. They are in a hard little sheath, more in the skin than out of it.



Replacement pullets enjoying their roost.  
Photo by Jan King.



Mel explaining his farming methods.  
Photo by Jan King.

“My butcher can’t deal with those very well,” Mel said.

Pin feathers stop growing in September and October. So, the solution has been to wait until October to butcher them. Unfortunately, ducks eat a lot of expensive corn between July and October. By October you might say Mel’s March ducks are gold plated.

He’s not giving up and neither is the butcher.

“I sent the butcher a goose in August,” Mel said. “He told me that he is learning how to handle pin feathers.”

Mel is also experimenting with Muscovy ducks.

“They are supposed to eat grass like a goose,” Mel said of his yet downy Muscovy ducklings.

The Muscovys are running with the full grown Pekins.

“I like to have them outside but I loose a lot to hawks,” he said as a magnificent bald eagle soared over the neighbor’s soybean field.

Mel also raises replacement pullets for other farmers. When these young female chickens are ready to lay eggs, Mel sells them. Hawks and owls like them as well.

We asked Mel how to cook a duck.

“Well, of course you can just roast it,” he said. “Or you can roast it, take the meat off the carcass, and mix it into a wild rice casserole.”