



Pink-headed Duck

THE PINK-HEADED DUCK *Rhodonessa*
caryophyllacea (Latham)

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FOR the last ten years or so there has been continuing effort on the part of the Bombay Natural History Society through its widespread membership in India and sportsmen in general to re-discover the Pink-headed Duck, or at least to obtain some dependable clues concerning its present status. To obviate the possibility of this duck being confused in the field with the much commoner Red-crested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) by casual duck shooters, as had often proved to be the case, coloured illustrations of both species side by side were prepared and widely distributed two years ago to forest and district officials, private hunting organisations, individual sportsmen, and other likely informers, particularly in its known range of distribution. It is significant that since these illustrations went out, the sporadic claims made from time to time of the duck being seen have ceased. The conclusion to be drawn is either that the Pink-headed Duck has indeed become extinct as was feared, or that if perchance there are any lingering survivors they keep strictly confined to the seclusion of some remote and inaccessible areas and do not overflow outside at any season as they apparently not infrequently did in former years when the species was less rare. All things considered, the

former assumption seems the more plausible. Otherwise it is difficult to conceive that from the hundreds of sportsmen who regularly shoot ducks in north-eastern India, in the known habitat of the species, the tens of thousands of ducks shot every winter there should not turn up a single specimen bagged or seen, or even in the Calcutta bird market where up to half a dozen or so live birds could be seen in most winters in the 1890's and up to the first decade of the present century.

The recorded history of the Pink-headed Duck, such as it is, is well known and no new information has emerged within recent years. Since it was first described in 1790¹ the species has at no time been recorded as common anywhere. In fact it was always considered rare enough to be taken notice of, even by such sportsmen as seldom bother to vet their bags and to whom the significance of a duck is merely how it tastes!

An anonymous writer² in the defunct *Asian Sporting Newspaper* (Calcutta) of 17th August, 1880, describes the bird as a permanent resident of Bengal, which he considered to be its headquarters. Bengal 'Presidency' in those days included Bihar, Orissa, and western Assam—all localities whence most of the existing museum specimens are derived. He also mentions east Bhagalpur immediately north of Ganges River, and the southwest portions of Malda district. In the cold weather, November to March, he observed the birds in flocks of 6 to 30 or even 40 in lagoons adjoining large rivers. They were paired off during April, nesting in May, and he found eggs in June and July. He describes the nests as circular, well built, of dry grass and a few feathers, about 9 inches in diameter and 4-5 inches deep, with walls 3-4 inches thick, without any special lining. They were hidden in the middle of tufts of tall grass, difficult to find, generally not more than 500 yards from water. The eggs, unlike those of other ducks, were round, close textured, glossless white. Clutches consisted of 5-10 eggs. The average measurements of 8 eggs from two different nests are given as 1.75" x 1.62" (= ca. 44 x 41 mm.), while two very round ones measured 1.71" x 1.66" (= ca. 43 x 42 mm.). Both birds were flushed near the nest, but he was unable to ascertain if both sexes, or which, incubated. When the young are fledged in September, he writes, the birds return with the receding waters to the jungly lagoons. In July 1880 nests were reported from the northern extremity of Patraha Katal (or jheel) in grass jungle on the banks. A breeding female, though unhurt by shot, fluttered about and dragged herself when approached, flew tottering with loud quacking 6 feet above the water, and flopped on the grassy land as if badly wounded. This manoeuvre was repeated when again approached; finally the bird rose in the air and flew off perfectly. Weights of 5 males shot between 13th February and 28th June are given as 2 lb. 3 oz. (13th Feb.); 1 lb. 14 oz., 2 lb., 1 lb. 13 oz., 1 lb. 12 oz. (28th June). Other details available in the scanty literature on the Pinkhead are that it is a surface-feeding duck like the Spotbill (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) but can dive with celerity like a pochard, and that it sometimes perches on trees, though Finn calls it a 'non-

¹Latham, *Index Ornithologicus* 2:866. Later Latham described it as common in Oudh, living in pairs, often kept tame, and becoming "tolerably familiar."

²Evidently F. A. Shillingford, a correspondent of A. O. Hume, responsible for most of the basic information we possess about the Pink-headed Duck in the wild state.

percher.' Tickell' in comparing this species with the Mallard says: "The neck is longer and thinner; the high position of the eye and the very gradual slope of the forehead give it a widely different look from *Anas* proper, more allied to *Dendrocygna* (Whistling Teal) . . . "

The above accounts are the principal 'source material' for practically all that has been written about the biology of the species, and the same information, in one form or another, has passed on from author to author.

Although a few live specimens have reached Europe from time to time, the Pink-headed Duck has never bred in captivity. The nuptial display of the male, said to resemble that of the Mallard, is imperfectly known, and the down plumage of the young not at all.

Probably some of the very last living examples of this duck were the eleven birds I was fortunate enough to see in the aviaries of the late Mr. Alfred Ezra in Foxwarren Park, near London, in December 1929. These birds had been shipped to him from Calcutta by his brother, Sir David Ezra, and were believed to come from the Goalpara district of western Assam, though their exact provenance was never disclosed. In spite of highly tempting monetary rewards offered during the last 30 years or so, it is ominous that not a single specimen has been produced by professional trappers. As a precautionary measure the capture or killing of the Pink-headed Duck, and the taking of its eggs has, since 1956, been totally prohibited by law, but it is clear that unfortunately protection has come too late. The last reliable sight record of the duck is of June 1935, by the late Mr. C. M. Inglis, in the Darbhanga district of Bihar.

The extinction of the Pink-headed Duck cannot be ascribed wholly to human vandalism though in the later stages killing doubtless helped to accelerate the pace. As a species it appears to have already reached a low threshold of numbers during the 19th century. The phenomenal growth and spread of human population in India in the bird's erstwhile habitats, and the consequent reclamation for cultivation of more and more of the swampy grass jungles it loved, have contributed to seal its doom. That small numbers may still linger in some remote refuge is perhaps wishful thinking but not an impossibility, although recent failures in the search make it seem highly improbable.

From the scrappy literature alone it seems difficult to form any adequate estimate of the comparative abundance enjoyed by this duck during the 170 years since first recognised by science. One reads statements like this of Jerdon (1863): "This very lovely duck is most common in parts of Bengal, but is found at times throughout northern India, is rare in the N.W. provinces, and still more so in Central and Southern India." Or this of W. T. Blanford (1898), "Fairly common and resident in Upper Bengal, in the districts of Purneah, Maldah, and Bhagalpur, and in Tirhoot . . . " And lastly this of Stuart Baker (1929), "In former days they were not rare in parts of Eastern Bengal and sometimes half a dozen could be picked up when returning from a tiger shoot . . . " (with a line of elephants beating through thick grass or forest with overgrown ponds and swamps). What are we to understand by

¹MS. of 'Indian Ornithology', written in the 1860's (?), never published. Now in the library of the Zoological Society of London.

"most common", "fairly common", "not rare" and "rare" in this context (Jerdon, 1863, *Birds of India*: 80, *Fauna of British India*, ed. 1, 4:426, *Fauna of British India*, ed. 2, 6:391)?

In an attempt to get some more concrete idea concerning the former numerical status of this unique duck, and perhaps build up a more complete picture of its overall distribution from specimens preserved in the major ornithological collections of the world, I recently addressed a large number of likely museums asking for data about any skins of the Pink-headed Duck that may be in their charge. The positive information received is summarised below. It makes a revealing documentation and should prove useful to future research workers, particularly since it is unlikely that any fresh acquisitions of the Pink-headed Duck will be possible in the future. The total number of skins preserved in museums, excluding the two in Japan (ex Ezra aviaries, Calcutta) that were destroyed during the recent wartime bombing (Yamashina, personal communication) is now 71. Allowing an extra 10% for any specimens unaccounted for in other public or private collections, one may take it that there are probably not more than 80 skins all told in existence to-day. Considering how zealous museums must have been all along to acquire specimens of this unique and beautiful duck, the meagreness of the number represented in world collections is symptomatic of its rarity. The oldest skins (mounted) are in Paris (Museum Nationale d'Hist. Naturelle) dated 1825; the youngest "wild" skin is probably the one in Yale Peabody Museum collected by C. M. Inglis in Darbhanga district, N. Bihar in 1923. I am doubtful about the two 1924 Kheri (U.P.) skins in the U.S. National Museum, Washington, and in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, as to whether they were killed in that year or merely presented then to the visiting Vernay-Faunthorpe Expedition by their host Mr. L. W. Hearsey, being actually collected earlier. If shot in 1924 this would seem to be the very last record of the procuring of a wild specimen. Museum skins with dates later than 1923 (latest 1936) are all of captive birds that died in aviaries, principally of the brothers Ezra, either in Calcutta or in London.

Since 1936 there is no reliable record known to me of a living Pink-headed Duck either in the wild state or in captivity. In a recent letter, however, Mr. H. G. Deignan says: "I seem to recall that Sir David Ezra showed me a living male in his aviaries in Calcutta in 1945." If there was such a bird it is not known where its skin rests at present. It must certainly be considered the very last example to be seen alive.

SPECIMENS OF THE PINK-HEADED DUCK (*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*) PRESERVED IN WORLD MUSEUMS

UNITED KINGDOM

British Museum (Natural History)

| No. of skins | Sex | Locality | Date | Remarks |
|--------------|-----|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| 8 | ♂ | "India". "N. India", Purneah | Many without. Earliest 7th Mar., | Total 21 specimens in 57 years. |
| 10 | ♀ | dist.. "Bootan", Calcutta, Nepal, | 1879 ("Calcutta") latest 8th May. | 7 of above ex-captivity Ezra |
| 3 | o? | "Baghownie. Tirhut, Bihar", | 1936 (ex-captivity, Ezra). | between 1929 and 1936. |
| | | "Madras". "ex-captivity". | | |
| 1 | ♂ | Nil. | Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh Nil. | Mounted. From collection of Sir William Jardine. |
| 1 | ♀ | Nil. | The Wildfowl Trust, Slimbridge "from before war"=the 1930s. | ex-Alfred Ezra's aviaries. |

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

American Museum of Natural History, New York

| | | | | |
|---|-----|---|--|---|
| 2 | ♂ | "India". "Mandalay Bazaar", | Earliest date 1898; latest 1936. | Includes 3 skins ex-Ezra aviaries. |
| 4 | (♂) | Calcutta market, "ex-Alfred Ezra's | | |
| 1 | ♀ | aviaries", "N. Kheri dist., S. border of Nepal". | | |
| 1 | (♀) | Smithsonian Institution, U.S. National Museum | | |
| 1 | ♀ | "N. Kheri dist., near S. border of | 1934 (sic)=1924 | Vernay-Faunthorpe Exped. |
| 1 | ♂ | Nepal" | | |
| | | ex-captivity A. Ezra | | |
| 1 | ♂ | Nil. | Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia Nil. | Part of Rivoli Massena Collection. Received by Academy in 1840 |
| 1 | o? | Nil. | Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard College Nil. | From Baron Lafresnaye's Collection |

| Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven | | | | | |
|---|-------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| No. of skins | Sex | Locality | Date | Remarks | |
| 2 | ♂ | 1 ex-captivity Ezra, Calcutta (said to come from Dhubri) | ca. 1930 | ex-coll. C. M. Inglis | |
| 1 | ♀ | "Bhagownie. Darbhanga dist., N. Bihar" | 7th April, 1923 | | |
| INDIA | | | | | |
| Bombay Natural History Society | | | | | |
| 1 | o? | "Kheri dist., U.P.", Calcutta Market, Alipore Zoo. "Darbhanga, N. Bihar", "Singu, Koolag, Upper Burma" | Earliest 1897; latest 1921 | | |
| 3 | ♂ | | | | |
| 1 | ♀ | | | | |
| Zoological Survey of India | | | | | |
| 8 | ♂ | "Burma", Calcutta Market, Alipore Zoo, ex-Ezra aviaries | Earliest pre-1843; latest 1926 | | |
| 8 | ♀ | | | | |
| GERMANY | | | | | |
| University Zoological Museum, Berlin | | | | | |
| 1 | ♀ | "Assam" | ? | Ex-coll. J. McClelland. Acquired from Calcutta 1843 | |
| 1 | ♂ | | | Died in Zoo. Berlin. 1908 | |
| Senckenburg Museum, Frankfurt | | | | | |
| 1 | ♂ | "Calcutta" | Nil | | |
| FRANCE | | | | | |
| Museum Nationale d'histoire Naturelle, Paris | | | | | |
| 2 | ♀ (or imm.) | "Calcutta," "Bengal", "Calcutta Bazar", "Jessore" | Earliest 1825 (Duvaucel); latest 1881 | 4 mounted and 2 cabinet skins | |
| 2 | ♂ (ad.) | | | | |
| 2 | ♀ (ad.) | | | | |
| ("Delacour had a number in his aviary (1930-35) same time as Ezra. Received from Calcutta"—Berlioz) | | | | | |
| NETHERLANDS | | | | | |
| Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, Leiden | | | | | |
| 1 | ♂ | "India" | Nil | Old mounted specimen | |
| SWEDEN | | | | | |
| State Museum of Natural History, Stockholm | | | | | |
| 2 | ♂ (ad.) | One obtained from A. Ezra | 25th July, 1910 | Received through Col. F. M. Bailey | |
| | | One, probably from his aviary. | October, 1927 | | |