

# THE SWANS, GEESE AND DUCKS

## of the British Isles

BY PETER SCOTT

### Part Two

The Third Annual Report contained Part One—Swans and Geese. In this Report the Egyptian Goose, Shelducks and Dabbling Ducks are dealt with ; it is hoped in subsequent Annual Reports to complete the series of British *Anatidæ*.

In presenting the short life histories the author wishes to acknowledge the following sources of information : *Handbook of British Birds* ; Witherby, Ticehurst and Tucker, 1939. *Geese of Europe and Asia* ; S. Alpheraky, 1905. *Check List of Birds of the World* ; J. L. Peters, 1931.

The four original oil paintings (30 in. × 20 in.) which have been reproduced in *The Swans, Geese and Ducks of the British Isles* were specially painted for the Trust by the Director. They have been presented and are for sale in aid of the Trust's funds. Applications should be made to the Assistant Secretary.



# THE SWANS, GEESE AND DUCKS

of the British Isles

## PLATE V. (SHELDUCKS)

### EGYPTIAN GOOSE *Alopochen aegyptiacus* (Brisson)

[No subspecies.] Breeds throughout Africa, excepting the arid regions, and in southern Palestine. Non-migratory, numerous records of occurrences in Europe, including British Isles, doubtless due mainly to escapes from captivity, but some evidence for sporadic influxes of wild birds (as in Ruddy Shelduck). Kept commonly in captivity in England since 18th century. Long found in a feral state in several parts of the country, so that case for admission as 'British bird' comparable to that of Canada Goose.

Nests in trees, often in old nests of other species, but many other sites recorded. Nest built of twigs, lined with grass. 5-8 eggs, late March-May in England. Incubation 28-30 days. Breeds freely in captivity, but very quarrelsome with other species.

Food : principally grasses, but variety of other vegetables and animal foods taken.

Voice : harsh frequently repeated bark. Male in display has curious rasping puffing call.

Identification : plumage pattern highly distinctive. Prominent chocolate patches round eye and in centre of lower breast. White wing-coverts, black primaries and metallic green secondaries produce striking and characteristic appearance in flight.

### RUDDY SHELDUCK *Tadorna ferruginea* (Pall.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds from South-eastern Europe and central Asia east to Manchuria and China and south to Tibet, Iran and rarely to Algeria and Morocco.

Nests in holes in wide variety of situations. 8-12 eggs (16 recorded) late May. Incubation 27-29 days. Breeds freely in captivity.

Winters N. African coast, S. Arabia, India, Ceylon, east to Japan, S. China and Formosa. Has occurred casually in eastern U.S.A., in W. Greenland, Iceland, almost all European countries, and Japan. Recorded from many

parts of Great Britain and Ireland, usually singly, but very occasionally in small flocks, mainly late summer, but impossible in most instances to distinguish between wild birds and those escaped from captivity.

Food : mainly vegetable, of many kinds, but also small fish, amphibia, worms, snails and crustaceans. Typically seen grazing in steppe country in large flocks.

Voice : loud moaning call : 'kow' or 't-t-taaw'.

Identification : general orange-brown coloration with pale buff or white head (considerable individual and seasonal variations in intensity), black flight-feathers and tail, wings strikingly black and white in flight.

#### **COMMON SHELDUCK** *Tadorna tadorna* (L.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds on coasts of western Europe from northern Norway to Normandy, and locally about the shores of the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas, in areas of mud-flats; also on saline lakes of central Asia to E. Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet. Nests chiefly in burrows, but also under hay-stacks and bramble bushes, in stone walls and occasionally hollow trees. 7-12 eggs (up to 20 recorded), late April to end of May in Britain. Incubation 28 (usually)-30 days. Breeds (but not very freely) in captivity.

Movements outside breeding-season not yet well understood. Occurs in winter over most of breeding range except extreme north, and also farther south, to Egypt, Palestine, N. India, Burma, S. China and Formosa. Adults of Western European breeding population undertake moult-migration in July, assembling in a very few areas (notably the Heligoland Bight, and the Bristol Channel), and returning very gradually through the winter to their breeding-haunts. Probably majority of, but not all, British birds go to Heligoland.

Food : principally molluscs and crustaceans, also insects, fish, annelids, and some vegetable matter (algæ, grasses and aquatic plants).

Voice : female, a loud laughing note in falling cadence. Male in display a high whistle.

Identification : black, white and chestnut plumage and red bill of adults unmistakable ; juveniles are dark grey-brown above, lack chestnut band and bright bills.

COMMON  
SHELDUCK



Immature

Adult ♂  
winter

♂ of light phase in  
winter plumage  
(lacking neck ring)



Immature

RUDDY  
SHELDUCK

EGYPTIAN  
GOOSE



Peter Scott  
1951



## PLATE VI. (DABBLING DUCKS)

### PINTAIL *Anas acuta acuta* (L.)

[American Pintail has been described as *Anas acuta tzitzihoa* Vieillot, but race is of doubtful validity.] Breeds in northern parts of Europe, Asia and North America, including British Isles, where increasing as breeding species.

Nests, often socially, on islands in lakes or in cover on shores of lakes (not necessarily close to water). 7-9 eggs (6-12 recorded), early May to end of June in Scotland. Incubation 23-25 days. Breeds freely in captivity.

Winters south, northern Africa, Persian Gulf, India, Ceylon, Burma and southern China. More numerous in Britain in winter than in breeding season. Pintails ringed in Britain have been recovered in Iceland and N. Russia, also most other countries of N. and W. Europe. Occurs mainly on coast and estuaries; frequent on inland waters but usually only in small numbers.

Food: chiefly vegetable, especially plants of brackish water. Animal food includes insects, molluscs, earthworms and amphibians.

Voice: drake, a low double whistle: 'prhew'; about a fifth lower than Teal. Female quacks rather like mallard but thinner.

Identification: long, slender neck, very distinctive; drake mainly grey with dark head and neck, white breast, tail long and pointed, predominantly bronze-green speculum; grey-blue bill. Female, mallard-like, but of slighter build, grey bill, and generally paler plumage with bold crescent-shaped markings on flanks.

### EUROPEAN GREEN-WINGED TEAL *Anas crecca crecca* (L.)

[Green-winged Teal *A. c. carolinensis* replaces *A. c. crecca* in North America, while a form found in the Aleutian Islands has been separated as *A. c. nimia*.]

Breeds in Europe and Asia from Iceland to China. Widely distributed as breeding bird in Britain, sparsely in southern England, most numerous in Scotland. Nests on the ground in moors and marshes, often well away from water. 8-11 eggs (7-16 recorded), late April to early June. Incubation 21-22 days. Breeds infrequently in captivity.

Winters south to North Africa, Nile Valley, Somaliland, Persia, India and Ceylon, Assam, southern China and the Philippines. Fairly regular on Atlantic coast of North America. Recoveries of ringed birds show that British breeding Teal are largely resident and are reinforced by large-scale immigration of birds from Scandinavia and Baltic states, many on passage to Ireland and France.

Food: largely vegetable, mostly aquatic plants. Animal food includes wide variety of invertebrates.

Voice: male, high double whistle: 'prhew'; about a fifth higher than Pintail. Female, like high pitched mallard, first quack loudest, tails off more quickly.

Identification: small size distinguishes from other British ducks except Garganey and Green-winged Teal; prominent horizontal white line above wings in male; speculum of both sexes green and black, with broad white or buffish-white anterior bar and very narrow posterior one in drake. Female indistinguishable from Green-winged Teal.

**AMERICAN GREEN-WINGED TEAL** *Anas crecca carolinensis* (Gm.)

[Subspecies see above.] Breeds in northern North America from Alaska to Hudson Bay, south to central California, northern Nebraska, southern Minnesota and rarely to Gulf of St. Lawrence. 10–12 eggs (6–18 recorded), second half of May and early June. Incubation 21–23 days. Breeds more freely than European Teal in captivity.

Winters from southern British Columbia, Arizona, New Mexico, Arkansas and Chesapeake Bay, South to British Honduras, the Gulf coast and the lesser Antilles. Casual in Greenland, Bermuda, Hawaii and Japan. About eight British records (none elsewhere in Europe) but may occur unrecognised comparatively frequently.

Food : about 90 per cent. vegetable, mainly seeds of sedges and pondweeds; also insects and molluscs (rotting salmon recorded).

Voice : indistinguishable from European Teal.

Identification : drake very similar to Teal, but with conspicuous vertical white mark on sides of breast and no horizontal white bar on the scapulars; white or buff 'spectacle marks' on sides of head much less intense; drake in eclipse and duck in all plumages not distinguishable from Teal in the field.

**MALLARD** *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos* (L.)

[*A. p. conboschas* replaces typical form in Greenland. *A. p. subboschas* from Iceland is probably not a valid race. Three endemic and sedentary ducks from islands in the Pacific are possibly conspecific : *A. p. wyvilliana* (Hawaiian Islands), *A. p. laysanensis* (Laysan Island), *A. p. oustaleti* (Guam, Saipan and Tinian).] Breeds in Europe and Asia from Arctic Circle south to the Mediterranean, Persia, Tibet, central China, Korea and northern Japan; Iceland; the Azores; northern and central North America; west of Hudson Bay and the Mississippi. Commonest breeding duck in Britain. Nests in fairly thick cover on ground, also holes in trees. 10–12 eggs (7–16 recorded; and fewer in re-nesting), usually in March or early April. Incubation 26–28 days, but unusually variable and 22 recorded. Breeds very freely in captivity and long domesticated; frequency of abnormally-plumaged birds in the wild indicates considerable admixture of domestic stock in wild population.

Winters from southern half of breeding range to North Africa, Nile Valley, India, Burma, southern China, Japan, southern Mexico and Florida. British birds largely resident and sedentary; joined in winter by birds from Iceland, Scandinavia, Baltic countries and Holland, some on passage to N. France.

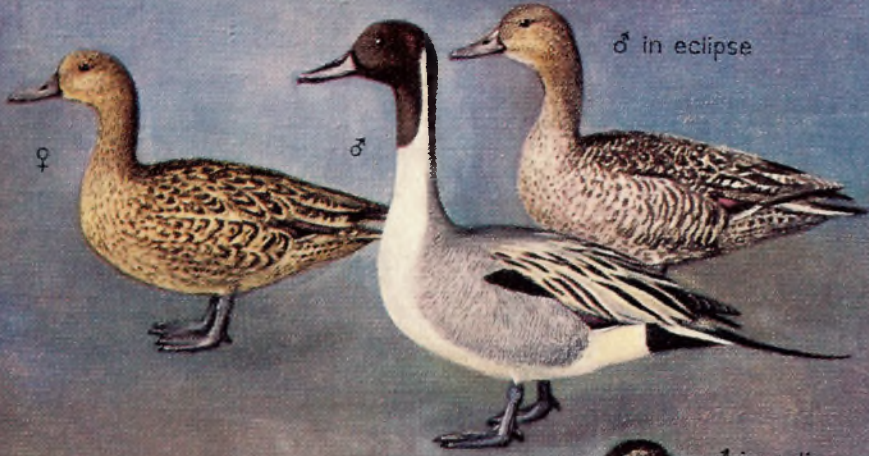
Food : mainly vegetable, of great variety, including grain from stubble fields in autumn. Animal food also varied, chiefly insects and molluscs.

Voice : female, loud and characteristic quack in falling diminuendo : 'kaaak-kaak-kak-kek-kek'. Male, low single quack, also, in display, a grunting whistle.

Identification : appearance of both sexes familiar, from domesticated birds, which are, however, larger; violet-purple speculum bordered by black and white bands on both sides is diagnostic in all plumages.



PINTAIL



♂ in eclipse

AMERICAN GREEN-WINGED TEAL



♂



♂

♂ in eclipse

EUROPEAN GREEN-WINGED TEAL



♂



♀

MALLARD

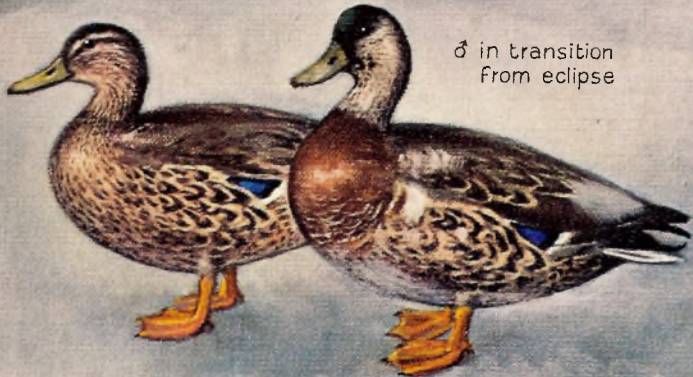


♀



♂

♂ in full eclipse



♂ in transition from eclipse

Peter Scott  
1951

Food : almost entirely vegetable, principally grasses and *Zostera*, though many aquatic plants recorded. Was much affected by failure of *Zostera* during early 1930's. Grazes commonly in meadows in large packs by day, although it feeds mainly by night.

Voice : male, a loud double whistle : 'whee-uw'. Female, a stuttering rasping purr : 'ch-churr'.

Identification : medium size duck with short neck and small, short, blue-grey bill; adult drakes show white patch on wing-coverts, especially noticeable in flight, but juveniles lack this feature and resemble females; speculum black and green, white belly of both sexes apparent on the wing. For differences from American Wigeon, see under that species.

#### **AMERICAN WIGEON** *Anas americana* (Gm.)

[No subspecies.] Breeds in northern North America from Yukon and Mackenzie valleys east to Hudson Bay and south to eastern Oregon, northern Utah and South Dakota. 9-11 eggs (6-13 recorded), June. Incubation 22-25 days. Does not breed very freely in captivity.

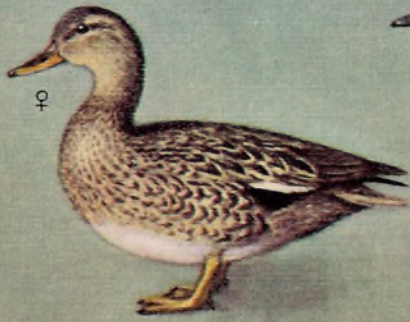
Winters from British Columbia, the central Mississippi Valley and Maryland, south to Costa Rica, rarely to Panama, Colombia, West Indies, Greenland, Aleutian, Commander and Hawaiian Islands, Japan and Azores. About twelve British records, but some may be due to escapes. Probably occurs more frequently and is unidentified, especially as female so similar to European species.

Food : largely vegetable matter, principally pondweed, also grasses and other aquatic plants. Animal food mainly snails.

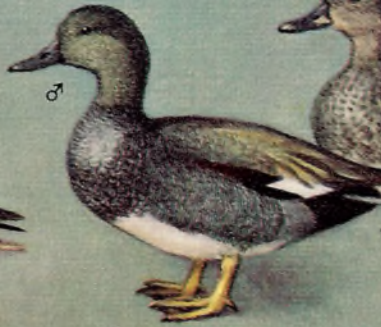
Voice : similar to European Wigeon but male cannot produce clear sweet whistle, only a stuttering attempt.

Identification : size and shape as Wigeon; drake is pale pinkish brown with grey speckled head and white crown, whereas European bird is grey with reddish-brown head and buff crown; glossy green on head only visible in good light ; duck only distinguishable from Wigeon under very favourable conditions, by more spotted head and darker patch behind eye.

GADWALL



♀

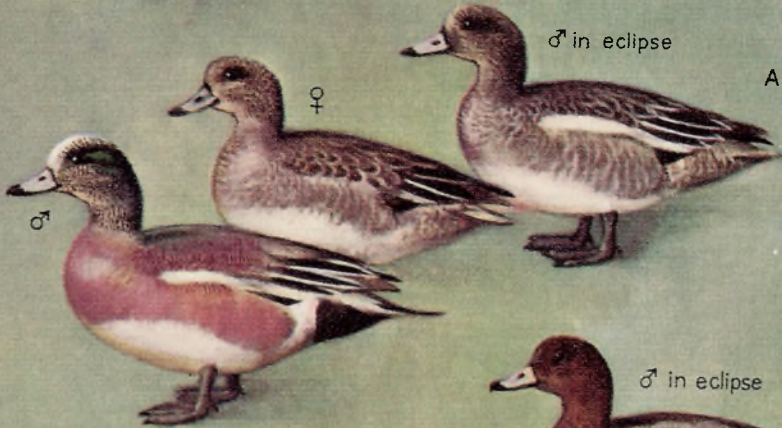


♂



♂ in eclipse

AMERICAN WIGEON



♂ in eclipse

♀

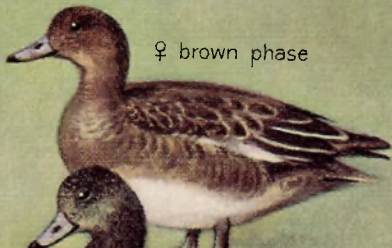
♂

♂ in eclipse

Adult ♂

♀ brown phase

EUROPEAN WIGEON



♀ grey phase



♂ first winter

Voice : male, scolding chatter : 'krrrp-kr-kr-krrrp'. Female, teal-like quack, seldom heard.

Identification : size as Garganey; head of drake dark slate-grey with white crescent in front of eye; most distinctive feature in all plumages, light-blue fore-wing (not blue-grey as in Garganey), nearly as conspicuous in duck as in drake, but often completely hidden when at rest.

**SHOVELER** *Anas clypeata* (L.)

[No subspecies.] Widespread as breeding species in Europe, Asia and North America, usually not north of Arctic Circle and not in eastern half of Canada. Now common and increasing in British Isles. Nests in meadows near water, favouring more open sites than most ducks. 8-12 eggs (7-14 recorded), April and May. Incubation 22-24 days. Breeds readily in captivity.

Winters from southern parts of breeding range south to North and East Africa, Persian Gulf, India, Ceylon, Burma, southern China, Japan, Hawaii, Lower California, Mexico, Honduras, Florida. British breeding birds are mainly summer residents. Breeding places of passage migrants and winter visitors not yet well established, apparently include Holland and N. Germany.

Food : no satisfactory studies of British birds, but American data indicate an unusually high proportion of animal food (34 per cent.), especially molluscs, but also crustaceans, insects, worms, tadpoles and frog spawn. Vegetable matter, buds, stems and seeds of many aquatic plants.

Voice : male, double clucking note : 'hnuk-hnuk'. Female, low quack, rarely heard. Wings make curious drumming rattle when bird rises, quite unlike any other duck.

Identification : large spoon-shaped bill diagnostic at all ages and seasons; breeding plumage of drake also distinctive; in flight pale-blue fore-wing noticeable, especially in drake, speculum green, bordered white in front and narrowly behind.

GARGANEY

♂ in eclipse

♀

♂

♀

♂ in eclipse

♂

AMERICAN  
BLUE-WINGED  
TEAL

♀

♂

SHOVELER

♂

♂

Males in eclipse  
and transitional  
plumages

Peter Scott  
1951



