

## The Marbled Teal

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In the summer of 1969 I paid a visit to the Marismas, the famous marshes of the Guadalquivir delta in south-west Spain, in order to photograph birds, among them the Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta* (= *Anas*) *angustirostris*.

I saw my first Marbled Teal in the bird market at Coria del Rio, a small town on the edge of the Guadalquivir delta, surely a strange place for an ornithologist to add to his life-list. White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala* were also being sold here. The birds are shot or trapped in the nearby Marismas.

There is plenty of ideal habitat for Marbled Teal in the Marismas. Very large areas are under water during the winter but the floods dry up in spring leaving smaller areas of shallow water with luxuriant growths of sedges *Carex* spp. and bulrush *Scirpus* sp. Here there is ample food for the birds and a safe area for rearing the young. The parts which dry out in summer are covered in glasswort *Salicornia fruticosa* and *Anthroznemum marcrastachyum*. Higher places in the *Salicornia* heath form islands in the winter floods, known locally as vetas. These have been colonised by sea blite *Suaeda maritima* and by various grasses and thistles. It is on the vetas that many species of birds, including waders,

pratincoles, and ducks, breed.

Although the textbooks state that Marbled Teal generally nest in clumps of grass or reed, on the Marismas they often choose a more artificial site. On many of the vetas there are reed and grass huts and it was in the roofs of these that I found a number of nests. As I approached one veta, six Marbled Teal flew off and landed on some nearby water, where they swam about anxiously. I quickly found three nests in the roof of a hut. One was under a cowskin laid on the roof to dry, and had no less than 20 eggs. The other two nests were in the thatching and each contained 16 eggs. I retreated a short distance and soon the females came back to the hut. They circled the hut twenty or thirty times before finally landing and walking to the nests. During this time the males stayed together on the water and only came back to the hut when the females were incubating again. Incidentally, the wall of the same hut contained two nests of Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*.

The photographs facing page 81 show one of the nest sites, and the female standing on the roof nearby. I believe this is the first time this species has been photographed at the nest.

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### Editorial comment:

The Marbled Teal is nowhere very common although it occurs in north-west Africa, the Middle East, the southern Soviet Union and northern India and Pakistan. The Guadalquivir delta is the sole regular breeding locality in Europe and Valverde (1964) estimated that population as having no more than 100 pairs. In West Pakistan its near-extinction as a breeding species has stimulated the restoration project at Lal Suharna, using birds raised at Slimbridge (see over). There have been objections to such re-introductions, on the grounds that different genetical stocks to the local ones are used. However, the Slimbridge stock derives from four pairs and an odd drake sent to us by Mr. R. Angorly of Basra, Iraq, in 1948, the first time for 30 years any had been in Britain. An interesting account of the first breeding

from this stock, at Leckford, was given by Jones (1951).

The large clutches recorded by Mr. Hawkes fall within the limits compiled by Bauer and Glutz (1968) although clutches of 10 and 11 are most common at Slimbridge. The eggs are quite small, Dr. J. Kear weighed 62 fresh ones at Slimbridge which ranged from 25.5 gm. to 34.5 gm. with an average of 29.9 gm., but the total mass is enormous compared with the weight of the female. Bauer and Glutz give an average for the latter in May of 348 gm. which would be almost matched by a clutch of 11. The possibility of more than one female contributing to the larger clutches cannot be excluded. The newly hatched downy young appear minute, 100 weighed by Dr. Kear ranged from 14.0 gm. to 22.0 gm. with an average of 17.5 gm. Nevertheless this is

5.3% of the female weight, high compared with, for instance, the Mallard (3.4%), but less so compared with diving ducks, 4.3-6.4% (see p. 123). Possibly this is another indication of its intermediate evolutionary position between dabbling and diving ducks already suggested by the courtship display patterns and the structure of its tracheal bulla (Johnsgard 1961; von der Wall 1962).

*Mr. C. D. W. Savage writes:*

#### **Marbled Teal project at Lal Suhanra, West Pakistan**

Within the last fifty years the Marbled Teal was not uncommon, both as a wintering and as a breeding bird in suitable habitats in many parts of south-west Asia from the Nile Delta through Palestine, Jordan, Mesopotamia, Fars, Sind and Baluchistan. Possibly half the winter populations were locally bred, while the rest were visitors presumably from the breeding grounds of Uzbekhestan and Turkestan. Since then, however, the wetland geography has changed profoundly, as a result of which there are no longer the prolific breeding grounds in the south of the U.S.S.R.; local breeding places from the Nile Delta through to Sind have been affected by development of irrigation projects, by greater water utilisation for agriculture, but above all by increased disturbance. Small pockets of breeding birds have recently been observed between the Tigris and Euphrates, and also in Fars, Iran, while occasional birds have been seen in Pakistan during the summer but without evidence of breeding. The former breeding colonies described by Zarudny in Seistan have, however, definitely disappeared.

In this context the Marbled Teal appeared to be a candidate for the Red Data Book on Endangered Species, but then large wintering flocks of up to 2,000 birds were reported in southern Turkey in 1967-68. Recent estimates have been smaller but it is apparent that the species is holding its own, if only just, in southern Europe. Nevertheless in Pakistan where

formerly it was both a resident and migrant the species was virtually extinct.

The Wildfowl Trust meanwhile had bred so many in 1968 they had difficulty in placing them. In 1969 with the help of the British National Appeal of World Wildlife they offered all their year's production for reintroduction in Pakistan. In November, 24 Marbled Teal arrived in Pakistan. Their destination was the Lal Suhanra sanctuary situated near the Sutlej river in Bahawalpur division. It straddles the Desert branch canal, and seven to twelve square miles of low lying land is flooded every year during the monsoon season by releases of surplus water from the canal. In winter much of this is drained back into the canal for irrigation use. This huge area is studded with islands and creeks, lotus pools, reed beds, tamarisk bushes and reed mace. Although dependent on the canal for water, there is permanent water in low lying areas at all times of the year and the richness of the bird life vouches for the variety and wealth of the food supply. In winter nearly a hundred species can be viewed in a few hours including six species of eagle and the nearly extinct Houbara Bustard. The sanctuary is supported by World Wildlife project 474. For the Marbled Teal the habitat appears to be ideal for the purpose of reintroduction; the species occurred there before, the tamarisk covered islands are typical breeding habitat in Baluchistan, and natural food supplies and official protection are available throughout the year.

The Wildfowl Trust birds have initially been placed in a covered enclosure in the sanctuary. In due course they will be released into a larger open enclosure which includes all habitat types and from which young unpinioned birds will be able to leave as they wish to colonise other parts of the sanctuary. Supplementary food supplies will, however, always be available at the enclosure and this it is hoped will encourage them not to wander too far before population density requires them to spread out from Lal Suhanra.

#### **References**

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