

The Auckland Island Flightless Teal

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The Auckland Island Flightless Teal *Anas aucklandica aucklandica* was first described by Gray (1844). His specimens were collected on Sir James Clark Ross's expedition which spent from 20th November to 12th December 1840 at the Auckland Islands (50-51°S., 165-166°E., 200 miles south of New Zealand). On 23rd November, the surgeon, Dr. R. McCormick, noted in his diary that '... a brown coloured duck frequents the harbour'. Earlier in that year a French expedition had visited the archipelago and discovered the now extinct Auckland Island Merganser, but made no mention of a flightless duck. Between 1806 (when they were discovered) and 1830, sealers and then whalers visited the islands frequently. The only settlers were a small colony of Maoris (1842) and about 300 British people (1849) sent there to re-establish the whaling industry. However, conditions were inhospitable and after 1856, when the last inhabitants left, the islands were seldom heard of, except in connection with numerous shipwrecks. Much of the early information on the Flightless Teal came from the crews of the Government steamer *Hinemoa*, which made several trips after 1879 to look for castaways. The one in 1907 included a scientific team and it was on this expedition that 12 Flightless Teal were caught off Ewing Island and taken to the Kapiti Island bird sanctuary off the coast of New Zealand near Wellington.

A Flightless Teal was also exhibited at London Zoo in 1895. In 1955 three birds came to the Wildfowl Trust as a gift from the New Zealand Government, but unfortunately they did not survive to reproduce. At the moment, no live specimens are known to exist outside the Auckland Islands.

A number of domestic animals were introduced on the Auckland Islands, mainly for the benefit of visiting ships and castaways. Pigs were released on Enderby in 1807 and, later, on most of the other islands. Sheep, goats and cattle were present from 1850. The latter are now only to be found on Rose and Enderby Islands, those on the main island having been killed by sealers. Rabbits and mice are plentiful on Rose and Enderby Islands. Rats from the numerous shipwrecks never became properly established. Dogs have not been seen recently and cats are limited to the main island. How-

ever, it appears that when Reischek (1889) visited the islands in 1888 most of the introductions were abundant. Reischek's description of the place is fairly detailed but he does not mention the flightless duck of which he had certainly been told. So by this time it might be supposed that numbers had been diminished by the introduced predators. Chapman (1891) reports that the expedition of 1890 saw only a few 'rare flightless Auckland Island duck'. In January 1901 only four were recorded by Lord Ranfurly's expedition. However, the habits of the Teal (which may even have been altered as a result of the necessity to avoid the predators) make it probable that it was not scarce but seldom seen, and according to Myers (Phillips 1926) there was no reason to suppose that its numbers had diminished much since its discovery. By 1941 it does seem to have become fairly rare. Teal were only seen occasionally on the outer islands and even less commonly on the main island by the coast watching party stationed there (Dr. C. A. Fleming, unpub.). During 1942, Fleming recorded the largest numbers on Ewing, Ocean, Rose and Enderby Islands, and in a bay west of Grafton Point, Adams Island. He had only two records for the main island, one at Tucker Point, and at Ranui Cove where Teal were seen 'occasionally'. The most ever seen at one time was 30-40 near Grafton Point.

Introductions may well have been the cause of their disappearance from the main island. The vegetation has apparently remained unchanged despite human settlement. The Auckland Islands are hilly and covered for the most part by low forests of mountain rata *Metrosideros lucida* with dense undergrowth. The open areas are covered with tussock grass or a short rough pasture which on Enderby Island forms an ideal hauling-out place for sea lions. The shores are steep and in some places the basalt cliffs of about 30 metres tower over numerous small inlets and caves. These caves, fringed with kelp appear to have become a refuge for the Flightless Teal.

On 7th February 1971 a party of tourists from the *Lindblad Explorer* saw one bird in the entrance to a cave in Sandy Bay, Enderby Island, standing on a ledge preening. At the approach of our small rubber dinghy it walked back into the cave where it stood for a few moments

before disappearing into the darkness. On the following day two birds were found, in this and the neighbouring cave. There was no obvious difference in plumage, which is probably to be expected in February, since, according to Falla and Stead (1938), males are eclipsed by March. The slight vermiculations on the feathers of the one shown in the photograph (Plate IV facing page 33) suggest that it could have been a male, and the prominent white ring around the eye indicates an adult.

The appearance of the duck is different from its relative, the New Zealand Brown Teal *Anas aucklandica chlorotis*, its shortened wings exposing a relatively large extent of tail behind. The colour is chestnut brown and fairly uniform, as against the speckled dark grey-brown of the Brown Duck, and the edges of the feathers are not as pale. Our two birds were probably not paired, since Fleming observed that pairs usually stay close to each other and maintain contact by calling. The whistled 'twirp' which he describes was not heard. The first bird, when approached on foot, walked through the cave and out at another entrance, swam along the shore amongst the kelp and returned to the cave. The second on

seeing the boat returned to its hiding place on the shingle at the back of its cave and ran back to a ledge just inside. Both were fairly tame and swam past the boat at a distance of about three metres. At one point the second bird demonstrated its limited flying ability by flapping its short wings as it jumped from the ledge. Although it did not go very far, it was evident that the wings are not completely ineffectual.

The camouflage is excellent amongst the brown kelp strands heaving with the swell. The movements of the Teal also match this background, as they swim low and hunched, and move rather jerkily. They were not feeding and are probably nocturnal feeders (Buller 1888), as are the Brown Teal. Fleming, however, records both nocturnal and diurnal feeding. On Rose, Adams, Ewing and Ocean Islands, he found birds or their excreta in tussock grass *Stilbocarpa* and under trees near holes, though in all these places they were probably within reach of the sea. Earlier observations have reported them near 'inland watercourses' (Waite 1909) but it is possible that the cave-dwelling members of the population have avoided predators and survived better in the long run.

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