

Field Notes on *Virago Castanea* (Eastern Teal), and *Virago Gibberifrons* (Grey Teal).

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A discussion arose lately about these birds, and I was surprised to hear that some were still under the impression that they were but one species, and that the grey birds were the same as the Chestnut, only out of plumage, or immature. Furthermore I have been requested to express my opinion on the subject through the pages of this journal. I may state that there is not a shadow of doubt in my mind about their being two distinct species, and good ones at that. My remarks are those of a field ornithologist. I leave the osteology of these birds to more able minds. Firstly, the Eastern Teal, Mountain Teal, or Chestnut-breasted Teal, whatever you like to call it in the vernacular, known to science as *Virago castanea* (*Mareca castanea*, Eyton Monograph Anat. p. 119, 1838, N.S.W.), and described by John Gould as *Anas punctata*, Birds of Australia, Vol. VII., pt. II., 1845, is a heavier bird than the grey species, and not nearly so common. One could safely say, as far as South Australian waters are concerned, that for every one of the Chestnut species one would see a hundred or more of the grey birds. It is true a few birds may be seen mixed up with the vast flocks of Grey Teal, but this I have always put down to the fact of their having been driven off from their kind and their haunts by sportsmen and other factors, and for the time have attached themselves to the ranks of their grey cousins. This I think I can prove later on.

V. castanea is a beautiful bird in full plumage, especially the male bird. The bronzy green head and neck shining in

the bright sunlight with great brilliance. The female always shows the rufous tinge more or less on the breast. These birds do not move about in large flocks in South Australia; about a dozen is as many as I have seen in one locality. If they can get it they prefer a stony or gravelly beach to the soft muddy swamps. I have seen them swimming in deep water off a rocky shore, but have never seen them diving for their food, although I have an idea they do so. They have a great liking for resting on boulders and rocks, thus, I think, the origin of the name "Mountain Teal." About 16 years ago, during a big drought in the interior, thousands of ducks visited the Reedbeds, and amongst them was a fair sprinkling of the teal under notice. This is the only time I have known them to visit the swamps here. They seem to prefer the large open waters, and frequent the rocky shores if there be such. There is no doubt John Gould took these two species to be one, for he speaks of having met them in great numbers, *Handbook, Birds of Australia*, Vol. II., p. 365. He goes on to say that it is very rare that a male is killed in the nuptial dress, and he is induced to believe that it is not assumed until the bird is two or three years old. One can understand Gould must have been very puzzled seeing so few of the Chestnut coloured birds in comparison to the Grey birds.

Virago gibberifrons nests in great numbers in the interior during wet seasons; many hundreds nesting together amongst the salt bush and *Polygonum* swamps, but I have never heard of the Chestnut species nesting with them. Only a few nests of the latter have ever come under my notice, and they were placed in hollow limbs of trees. I have seen many nests of Grey Teal in trees, and here at the Reedbeds they once nested nearly every year, but never once did I see *V. castanea* nesting. In February, 1912, my wife and I made a trip to Lakes Alexandrina and Albert, and spent some little time on the waters there making very many useful observations. We were very fortunate in having the services of Mr. Fred Ayres, a man who has passed the better part of his life shooting game for the market, and he has a wonderful store of knowledge pertaining to the habits of the wild fowl. I was very pleased to find that my observations were confirmed in reference to these teal. While we were on the lakes and amongst the swamps along their shores we saw vast flocks of *V. gibberifrons*, but not one *V. castanea*, and when I mentioned this to our guide he at

once said, "If you want Mountain Teal we must steam over to the rocky shores at the other side of the lake." And I found this to be correct. Seeing that these birds have distinct habits and that both have been found breeding, the Grey Teal in vast numbers without a single Chestnut bird amongst them, surely this alone must dispel any doubt upon the subject.
