

ARE THE DUSKY AND COMMON MOORHENS ONE SPECIES?

by JOHN B. COX

Near the ferry at Mannum, a river town on the Murray, South Australia, on 17 July, 1971, I noticed a pair of swimming "Dusky" Moorhens *Gallinula tenebrosa* accompanied by three fully grown juveniles, presumably their offspring. All five showed a white stripe running from near the bend of the wing backwards along their flanks, very similar to the Common Moorhen *G. chloropus*, with which species I am familiar in the U.K. and continental Europe.

In the Common Moorhen this apparently continuous stripe is actually made up of several (about five) slanting stripes which run together and form a single line.

I subsequently looked for, and found on several occasions, more birds possessing this white flank stripe, twelve miles upstream. It seems that a small proportion of the *tenebrosa* population, on this stretch of the Murray at least, have this atypical plumage.

Most literature suggests that one of the main distinctions between the two species is this white flank stripe, and I know of no other reports of the Australian bird possessing

it. A subsequent examination of skins in the South Australian Museum failed to reveal any specimens of *tenebrosa* with this flank stripe.

On 12 June, 1972, of 75 moorhens observed (without binoculars) along about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of the Torrens Lake, Adelaide, two birds in immature plumage showed a small amount of white on their sides near the bend of the wing, and one adult had an interrupted line made up of five separate white patches running along the full length of its flank.

Basing my opinion on these observations and noting, too, that Slater (1971, *A Field Guide to Australian Birds*, 275-276), says the two species "may be conspecific" and also names Indonesia as being within the distribution range of both of them, I feel the evidence that *chloropus* and *tenebrosa* are distinct species now seems rather flimsy. It seems desirable that some of these atypical *tenebrosa* should be examined with a view to further considerations about their true specific status.