NORTHERN SHOVELER AT COONGIE LAKE

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INTRODUCTION

The Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* breeds at latitudes north of 43° N in eastern Asia, and south to about 35° N in the western Palearctic and western Nearctic. In all parts of its range the species is mainly migratory, with large-scale dispersal to tropical regions which include Indo-China and occasionally north Borneo (Cramp *et al.* 1977; Vaurie 1965). It is closely related to the Australasian Shoveler *A. rhynchotis,* and appears to occupy the same ecological niche (Frith 1967).

A. clypeata has been recorded several times in Australasia. All records have been of males in full or partial breeding plumage. Birds in other plumages have presumably been overlooked because of the lack of known ways of distinguishing them from *rhynchotis.* Gould (1865:370), while travelling in New South Wales during "the rainy season" of 1839, saw "every now and then, one, two or more beautifully plumaged [Northern] Shovelers". Unfortunately the dates of these observations remain vague, because Gould is known to have travelled widely in eastern N.S.W. in February, March, September and December of that year (Hindwood 1938), while the reference to the rainy season is ambiguous. Campbell (1900), quoted a record by "a correspondent from Queensland . . . some years ago" of what was almost certainly *A. clypeata.* Recently, in March 1975, a bird was shot at Louth on the Darling River in inland N.S.W. (Moffat 1979). In New Zealand there have been confirmed records on 6 May 1968, 4 May 1969, 7 August 1971 and 27-31 May 1975, besides several unconfirmed records (Edgar 1973, 1975; Howard 1968; Kinsky and Jones 1972; Stidolph 1974). There are no records from Papua New Guinea. The following is the first from South Australia.

THE RECORD

On 28 August 1979 a male *clypeata* in full breeding plumage and a companion bird were sighted in a backwater on the south-western side of Coongie Lake, which lies at 27° 11' S, 140° 10' E, 82 km NW of Innamincka and *ca* 600 km NW of Louth, the site of the previous most westerly record in Australasia. The birds were swimming among numerous Australasian Shovelers, Grey Teal *Anas gibberifrons,* Hardhead *Aythya australis,* and Pink-eared Ducks *Malacorhynchus membranaceus.* Almost immediately after being sighted, and for no apparent reason, the two birds in question flew out of sight, leaving the other ducks undisturbed on the water. They were later relocated on the open part of the lake, and were watched for about three hours, from atop a sand ridge, by the authors and 11 others, including S. A. Parker, the Curator of Birds at the South Australian Museum. Field descriptions and sketches were compiled at the time, and a photographic slide of limited value was obtained.

> Coloured male: whole of head and upper neck dark greyish, with a green tinge apparent at certain angles; the dark greyish being clearly demarcated from clean white on the chest and lower neck, almost meeting on the upper back, giving the impression of a white "saddle"; abdomen and flanks russet or rich chestnut surrounded by a white area, including a conspicuous flank patch, adjoining a blackish undertail; white extending from the "saddle" along the sides of the brown back to the scapulars; bill dark grey; overall size and shape of the bird, including the bill, the same as *rhynchotis.*
>
> Companion bird: like female-phase *rhynchotis* but with rich chestnut breast and underparts, and distinct whitish patch at rear of flank.

When the birds were flying, good views were obtained of the male at *ca* 200 m. Its sharply demarcated white chest was then noted; but the companion showed no distinctive markings.

Because the birds stayed close together throughout the period of observation, it seems probable that the companion was of the same species as the coloured bird, the latter being typical of *clypeata* in full breeding plumage. The companion showed the features of an adult male *clypeata* or *rhynchotis* in almost complete eclipse.

DISCUSSION

Both the date of the sighting and the plumage of the coloured bird are noteworthy, in the light of published information about the movements and moult of *clypeata.*

Throughout the Holarctic breeding range of the species, the main southward passage occurs in September-October, and the main northward passage in March-April (Bent 1923; Dement'ev *et al.* 1951; Cramp *et al.* 1977). Early arrivals in Senegal occur in October, and in Central America in mid-October. The species leaves tropical Africa in February, and lower California by early April at the latest. Thus the Coongie record, like the third New Zealand

record, was at an abnormally early date, while the other New Zealand records were unusually late.

The post-nuptial moult (from breeding to eclipse) among Palearctic *clypeata* lasts from May to August or September, and the pre-nuptial moult from August to November (Cramp *et al.* 1977; Dement'ev *et al.* 1951). Among Nearctic birds the post-nuptial moult starts in July and is very rapid, while the pre-nuptial moult lasts from mid-October to December (Bent 1923). Exceptions to these rules seem to be rare or unknown, because they are not mentioned by Bent, Cramp or Dement'ev. Male *rhynchotis* in New Zealand — and presumably in Australia too—are in breeding plumage from April or May to approximately October (Kinsky & Jones 1972). Thus the plumage of the coloured Coongie bird and the third New Zealand bird are completely out of phase with *clypeata* but in phase with *rhynchotis*. The companion bird at Coongie was in phase with *clypeata* in plumage but not in date of occurrence. On the other hand the Louth bird — and probably Gould's also, given the dates of his travels — were in phase with *clypeata* in both plumage and movements.

To account for the abnormal dates and plumages of the New Zealand birds, Kinsky and Jones assumed that some *clypeata* had after reaching southerly latitudes lost their migratory urge and adapted their moult cycle to southern conditions. They found support for this hypothesis in the sighting of an apparent hybrid, and found strong reasons to reject the possibility that this and the other birds were escapees (Kinsky & Jones 1972; Kinsky 1972). Their hypothesis is equally applicable to the Coongie birds. Presumably *clypeata* which have reached southerly latitudes are no longer subject to their normal photoperiodic (or other) stimuli to moult and migration. Dr L. W. Braithwaite, of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, commented on the Coongie record (pers. comm. to DHC, 20 June 1980): "I would assume the bird(s) probably arrived during the northern winter and therefore our summer. From photoperiod work on our black duck [*Anas superciliosa*] I would gauge that residence through our autumn and then into late winter-almost spring, would be sufficient to 'rephase' the moult to that of our shoveler."

Kinsky and Jones believed that the New Zealand birds originated in North America, having overshot their migratory destination in the Pacific. The Coongie birds seem more likely to have originated in Asia, because the South Australian bird list includes many visitors of known Asian origin, and none of known North American origin.

Although it has been assumed that individuals of *clypeata* reached Australasia by travelling beyond their normal wintering destinations on their way south, there is another possibility, which is that, after wintering in their normal areas, they migrated south instead of north.

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