



The New Zealand Brown Teal



Overview

The NZ Brown Teal (*Anas chlorotis*) is New Zealand's rarest mainland duck species and in great danger of premature extinction. Brown teal are the world's second rarest duck species – only the Campbell Island Teal is rarer.

The Brown Teal Conservation Trust was founded in 2002 with the main objective of saving brown teal from extinction – to be achieved by a combination of advocacy, habitat creation, enhancement, manipulation, and protection, predator control at key brown teal sites and a major captive breeding programme. Coupled with a major advocacy and fund raising programme to ensure that the Trust's objectives and plans are achieved – and the unique brown teal population is expanded and saved from extinction. Many are NZ species.

Extinction

In the 17th Century, which is not really all that long ago, the world had approximately 8,500 living species of birds. Since then approximately 100 have become

extinct and approximately 250 are presently in some danger of extinction.

A number of experts have long promoted the philosophy that extinction is a biological certainty and is an intrinsic part of the evolution process, with natural causes being the main cause/route to extinction – earthquakes, eruptions, floods, massive natural environmental changes, competition for food, and so on. Historically this is, of course, very true, but in the past 100 years the path towards extinction has, for many bird species, undoubtedly been hastened by a massive growth in the world's population and by man's poor respect for the natural environment and for the world's wild animals and birds, together with man's generally abysmal understanding of the environment and how to successfully manage our natural resources.

Nothing could be truer than with the New Zealand situation, where, in 2003, New Zealand holds the world record for having the highest number of endangered birds; none of which have become endangered by 'natural causes'. These species have become endangered by man's interference with nature – by introducing predators, by introducing competing bird life, by destroying habitat, by modifying/disturbing habitat and by excessive hunting.

All of these accumulated factors have led to the precarious state of many bird species in New Zealand, with the brown teal population suffering more than any other endemic species of waterfowl. When coupled with an historic lack of understanding of brown teal ecology, natural history, habitat and food requirements, the effects of predation and hunting, there is little wonder that in 2003 the brown teal is on a rapidly accelerating path towards extinction.

Extinction is permanent and there is no possibility of re-inventing brown teal once the species has disappeared. However, with carefully directed and dedicated management, coupled with the technology now available, and with an increasing enthusiasm for retaining the remaining environment that we still have in New Zealand, which is undoubtedly still a quality environment compared to most other countries, brown teal and most of our other endangered birds can be saved from what can only be described as 'premature extinction'.

Distribution – historical and current

During the 1800's brown teal were distributed in millions throughout New Zealand.

Research carried out in 2001 determined that brown teal were present in New Zealand over 10,000 years ago and were spread throughout every corner of the country's once vast wetlands.

From the mid 1800s, as more and more immigrants came to New Zealand and brought with them their cats, muskdeers (ferrets, stoats and weasels), hedgehogs, rats – and their firearms – brown teal commenced their steady decline. On top of these introductions the massive drainage of wetlands and destruction of the country's native timber commenced.

With the massive expansion in the numbers of feral cats and muskdeers the past decade has seen brown teal numbers decline at an alarming rate. Today there are only approximately 250 brown teal surviving in the wild in the Northland area of New Zealand and 750 on Great Barrier Island in the Hauraki Gulf.

Unique values of the brown teal

It is mainly the behavioural features of brown teal, which set it apart from all other species of dabbling duck, and in a class of its own.

Brown teal have the unique and extraordinary tendency to hide in grass and overhanging vegetation for most of the day and whilst this behaviour has been generally described as 'crepuscular' it is now felt more appropriate to describe it as 'nocturnal'.

Wild brown teal are incredibly active at night and spend hours searching in paddocks (fields) for worms and insects, or in estuaries for small shellfish.

They also seem to mostly enjoy themselves dissecting patches of cow dung and also sipping endlessly in muddy pools. This trait is very obvious with captive teal and a muddy area in an aviary is a priority amongst captive breeders.

Whilst brown teal are strong fliers they do not take readily to the air and seem to prefer to scuttle around the ground both in the wild and in captivity. Whilst the erection of perches are always recommended in brown teal aviaries teal seldom use anything but a low level perch, and one they can jump to, rather than have to fly.

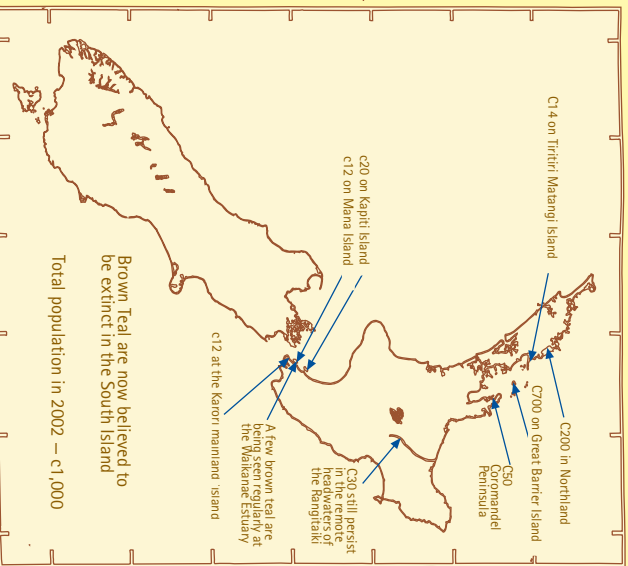
Outside the breeding season brown teal are highly gregarious, just like mallards, assembling in flocks at their traditional roost site. Where roost sites have been modified by man, or by nature, changes at the flock site have invariably led to the decline of brown teal in that area. Unlike mallards brown teal do not adapt readily to change.

Another unique feature of brown teal is that when a pair bond has been established both male and female become the most vicious and murderous of all dabbling ducks.

No other dabbling duck species display this feature, and this behaviour is not apparent, to anywhere near the same degree, in either the Auckland or Campbell Island teal.

In the wild, and in captivity, brown teal, are superior parents compared to all other dabbling ducks, with the male actively educating and nurturing his progeny right through to the flying stage - and beyond. The degree of such male attentiveness is not found in any other species of dabbling duck.

But the most alarming feature of brown teal behaviour is the species vulnerability to predators – far more vulnerable than any other species of waterfowl.



National Distribution of Brown Teal in the Wild



Brown Teal Habitat in Northland