

GRASS WHISTLING DUCK IN WAIKATO DELTA

On 8 April 1982, Peter Howard, the senior field officer of the Auckland Acclimatisation Society, and I observed a flock of nine Grass Whistling Ducks (*Dendrocygna eytoni*) at the Elbow landing on the north side of the lower Waikato River near Puni. These birds had been first seen on 6 April by workers at the adjacent sand extraction plant. Although we saw 9 birds, the workers reported that at other times there were up to 11 birds.

The birds, when first seen, were perched along the trunk of a willow tree inclined at a slight angle, 6-8 metres above the water. They were very wary and any approach closer than 20 metres would put them to flight. In flight they had a slow deliberate wing beat, on rounded wings, with legs trailing behind (not unlike a Pukeko). After flying around for several wide circuits, occasionally giving a shrill whistle, they landed back in the same tree, alighting on the trunk with little difficulty.

The following descriptive notes were taken:

Head and neck: Light greyish brown, although some birds had a brighter brownish tinge on the back of the head and neck.

Wings: Dark brown, as were the tail and rump, although when the birds were in flight a white bar was visible across the rump.

Breast: Chestnut with dark barring. Once again some birds were more brightly coloured than others.

Abdomen: White. Along the flanks were long white plumes which were most obvious when the birds were roosting.

Legs and bill: Pink.

Despite further visits by DAL and other South Auckland members the birds were not seen again. However, the sand plant workers reported that they were occasionally seen until the start of the duck shooting season on 1 May. The area where the birds were living is subject to intense hunting pressure and so they were probably dispersed. After some publicity in the press and through Acclimatisation Society bulletins, unconfirmed reports were received in early May from several areas — of five birds at the junction of the Waipa and Waikato rivers, two birds at Kinleith and one bird shot at Te Aroha. There have been no further reports since that time.

Because of the extreme wariness of the birds and the large number in the flock, they were most unlikely to have been escaped captive birds but were probably stragglers from Australia.

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