

SHORT NOTES

First record of Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) in New Zealand

At Farewell Spit on 19 October 1997, about an hour before high tide (11:30 h), I approached Banana Pan, which was flooded to a depth of 10-20 cm. There I saw a group of about ten ducks swim out from the reedy edge. Scanning them with 7x40 binoculars, one caught my attention. It had a chocolate-brown head with a white stripe running up the nape to about eye level. From experience in Britain I recognised it immediately as a male Pintail (*Anas acuta*).

It was obviously more slender than the nearby Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*); the head was smaller with a steeper forehead, and the neck was longer and slimmer. The body appeared pale, white at the front with the white extending as a stripe up the hind part of the neck. There was also a very conspicuous white thigh patch, and the tail was longer and more pointed than that of a Mallard.

After about ten minutes observation at about 100 m, I tried to approach more closely, but the flock took off and the Pintail flew past me at about 50 m range in company with three Mallards. In flight it was noticeably smaller than a Mallard, with a thin neck and small head, held slightly down at times. The underparts appeared pale with the white thigh patch conspicuous. The tail was long, with two projecting central tail feathers. The upperparts were not seen well, but they too looked pale with a slight white wing bar. The birds flew off to the southeast and could not be found again that day. The sky was overcast, so with the less than excellent light conditions certain details of the plumage were not visible. However, enough distinguishing features were seen for me to be totally confident about the identification.

Returning home I discovered this was a new record for New Zealand, and so phoned various ornithologists, and returned to the Spit on 21 October with Richard Stocker. We checked several lakes and ponds before arriving at the Banana Pan about 13:30 h. The Pintail was spotted immediately with a flock of 18 Mallard at the far side of the pan about 200 m away. We examined it for a few minutes using binoculars and telescope but it was sitting at a three-quarter angle and, as the wind was causing our instruments to shake, we decided to move forward slightly into the shelter of a dune. Unfortunately, the birds took flight and although the same distinguishing features as before were seen, no new characters were noted. The bird was not seen again.

The Pintail breeds throughout the Palearctic and Nearctic migrating south to winter between 40°N and the equator. In Asia it comes only as far south as Thailand and the Philippines with vagrants reaching Micronesia, Polynesia and New Guinea. There is one record for Australia, of a male near Perth in July 1985 (Marchant & Higgins 1990), but Simpson and Day (1993) mention other sightings. The locality and the wariness of this bird make it most unlikely that it was an

escapee. This record has been accepted unanimously by the Rare Birds Committee of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand.

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Territorial dispute between two male Bellbirds (*Anthornis melanura*) ends in death by drowning

Mid morning on 15 December 1998 we were walking beside a small, slow-moving stream feeding into the Travers River, Nelson Lakes National Park, when we became aware of a Bellbird (*Anthornis melanura*) flapping its wings and splashing in the water about 15 m upstream from us. At first glance we thought it was a bird bathing, but soon realised that there were two birds fighting each other. One of them managed to get on top of the other. Four times over the next minute or so the submerged bird managed to lift its head out of the water, but the other bird, a male, promptly put its foot on it and pushed it under again, all the while continuously flapping his wings. When the victim ceased struggling the male, still flapping his wings, continued to stand on the submerged bird. During the next four minutes the birds floated to within two metres of us. At this point the survivor became aware of our presence and flew onto a low branch of a nearby tree where he appeared very tired and spent the next two minutes alternatively resting and preening. Meanwhile, the drowned bird, floating on its back, drifted farther downstream. We retrieved the body and ascertained that it too was a male.