

## SHORT NOTE

### Northern Shovelers near Wanganui

A male Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) was seen at Pauri Lake, Wanganui, on 19 August 1989 by Ormond Torr and PFB. A return visit was made the next day with Ian Saville, who knows the species well from his native United Kingdom. On arrival he suggested that a female with which the male was associating was also a Northern Shoveler, and details gathered over the following days confirmed both identifications. Both birds were last seen on 24 August.

Detailed descriptions of both birds, together with photos, were sent to the Rare Birds Committee, which accepted both records.

**Male:** A classic individual in full breeding plumage. Its head and neck were uniform dark bottle-green, cleanly demarcated from the white breast. The white of the breast extended up to above the wing and was also cleanly demarcated from the sides and belly, which were rich orange-chestnut, paler than on the New Zealand Shovelers (*Anas rhynchotis variegata*) nearby and lacking their reddish tone. Some fine dark vermiculations at the upper rear sides were visible at close range with a telescope. The white flank patches were more obvious than on New Zealand Shovelers.

The mantle immediately behind the head was almost white with scattered dark marks, quickly becoming mottled and then dark. This effect was due to white edgings on dark feathers gradually changing to light brown edgings on the lower mantle and upper back.

Several long white scapular feathers on both sides of the body were very prominent, visible from a long range. Its tail appeared basically white, both above and below, showing as a white line separating the dark upper and under tail-coverts. In flight this white tail contrasted greatly with the brown tails of the New Zealand Shovelers. The wings were not notably different from those of New Zealand Shovelers. The bare parts were similar to those of New Zealand Shovelers but the yellow eye was more noticeable (due presumably to the darker head colour).

In general, this was a very pale bird, noticeable by naked eye at up to 300 m range in good light. When it flew the impression given was of a central dark stripe down the middle of the back with large white streaks down either side, reminiscent of a male Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*).

**Female:** This was also a much paler bird than the female New Zealand Shovelers, visible at long distances.

The head was lighter than on New Zealand Shoveler females. The cheeks were light sandy brown, and the forehead and crown, although darker than the cheeks, were much paler than on New Zealand Shovelers.

The breast, belly, sides, vent and under tail-coverts were overall a lot paler than on New Zealand Shovelers because

1. The dark brown centres of the feathers were lighter than on New Zealand birds, and
2. The brown centres were much smaller, being almost absent on the belly and much reduced around the vent.

The mantle and back were also paler. Although the colour of the centres of the feathers was similar to that of New Zealand Shovelers, the light margins of the feathers were much paler and two to three times as wide.

Tail feathers were off-white, the central feathers being light brown, showing up well among the brown-tailed New Zealand females.

Its bill was paler than that of New Zealand Shovelers, about the same tone as its cheeks. The legs were bright orange, marginally duller than those of the males of both shoveler species. New Zealand Shoveler females had dusky legs, with only hints of orange or yellow.

By its paleness, the bird could be seen from long distances, whereas New Zealand Shovelers tended to disappear into the background. In flight, its underparts were very visibly pale, the whitish tail especially so.

The two Northern Shovelers were almost always seen together. Even in flight they frequently paired off, and on the water they always slightly separated themselves from the New Zealand Shovelers. On occasion the male was seen to perform minor head bobbing displays to the female.

### Discussion

Treatment of the Northern Shoveler in New Zealand literature in the past has been cursory, and so their identification has generally been thought more difficult than it is. Kinsky & Jones (1972), discussing the second and third occurrences of the species in New Zealand, outlined many identification features but did not mention some that were important in the Wanganui birds.

The much paler tail of the Northern Shoveler is a feature not mentioned in any literature as far as I know, despite the fact that any good illustration of the species shows it. On the first specimen found in New Zealand, a male in the Auckland Museum (study skin AV 1224), the undertail is white and the central uppertail is brown with white margins, the margins getting thicker towards the edges, reaching 2-3 mm in width. In comparison the study skins of New Zealand males show a grey-white undertail and a dark brown uppertail with much slimmer margins. This difference was visible in the Wanganui male both at rest and in flight.

Female Northern Shovelers in New Zealand are much harder to identify. Kinsky & Jones (1972) said that females were "...generally lighter and more buff all over than the darker New Zealand race", reasons for which have been given in the description of the Wanganui bird. The pale tail and bright orange feet were also important characteristics not found in New Zealand Shovelers and are more simple diagnostic features, not requiring the judgement of relative paleness.

The Wanganui birds were in breeding plumage when Northern Hemisphere birds should have been in eclipse plumage (Cramp & Simmons 1977). They had probably been in the country, or at least the Southern Hemisphere, for long enough to adapt to Southern Hemisphere moult patterns, as has happened in the past in other species, e.g. Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit (Heather & Brathwaite 1985) and White-winged Black Tern

(Pierce 1985), and has been assumed in some previous Northern Shoveler records.

The previous records of Northern Shoveler in New Zealand are as follows:

Maungatawhiri Swamp, lower Waikato, a male shot on 6 May 1968 (Howard 1968).

Lake Ngakawau, Levin, a male shot on 4 May 1969 (Kinsky & Jones 1972).

Lake Horowhenua, Levin, a male on 7 August 1971 (Kinsky & Jones 1972).

Wryburn's lagoon, Mangatawhiri River, a male on 30 March 1974 (A.Habraken 1974).

Lake Horowhenua, a drake and probable duck, 27-31 May 1975 (E.B.Jones 1975).

Lake Horowhenua, a male, May 1980 (H.A.Robertson, pers. comm.).

Some doubt has been cast on the 1970s sightings (e.g. Williams 1985) because the birds were in breeding plumage when Northern Hemisphere birds would have been in eclipse plumage, and it has been suggested that they were misidentified pale New Zealand Shovelers. The Wanganui sightings prove that birds can be in Southern Hemisphere plumage timing, which adds credence to the earlier sightings. The Wanganui sightings become then the seventh male and first confirmed female for New Zealand.

On the west side of the Pacific Ocean, Northern Shovelers winter as far south as the Philippines, straggling to Borneo and New Guinea (Madge & Burn 1988), but Australian records are few. A highly migratory North American population has an element passing into Polynesia via Hawaii (Cramp & Simmons 1977), which Kinsky & Jones (1972) considered to be the probable source of vagrant birds to New Zealand.

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