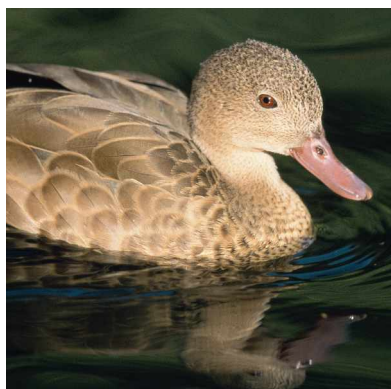


MADAGASCAR TEAL

Scientific name – *Anas bernieri*



Background

The Madagascar teal was once one of the world's rarest and least known species of wildfowl. Also known as Bernier's teal, it was first described in 1860, but because it was so poorly known, the species was considered 'rediscovered' when found on lakes along the west coast of Madagascar in 1969.

A survey in 1992 revealed this shy and retiring teal to have a very small population, thought to be largely due to encroachment on their habitat by humans - they needed urgent help. Durrell decided to begin a captive breeding programme at its headquarters in Jersey. In 1993 four wild teal were caught, which frustratingly all turned out to be male (these little ducks are notoriously difficult to sex). It was not until 1995, with the arrival of 2 females, which had proved rather elusive, that the captive breeding part of the rescue strategy got underway. In 1998 Madagascar teal bred in Jersey for the first time ever in captivity, and to date around 100 young have been reared by Durrell – it seems that we've made them feel at home!

Also crucial to the conservation of this species is extensive research on its behaviour and needs in both conservation care situations and in its natural habitat, as well as the support and education of local people in Madagascar. The teal still faces a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future, and therefore Durrell's conservation plans are critical to its survival.

Species classification

Wildfowl (ducks, geese and swans) belong to the bird 'order' known as the *Anseriformes* and the family *Anatidae*, which is comprised of 42 smaller groups or 'genera'. The 100 or so species of duck make up 30 of these groups, the largest of which is known as *Anas*, and contains around 40 species of duck, including a dozen or so kinds called teal (the name given to various species of small duck). The Madagascar teal is the most westerly representative of the 5 species of grey teal found in SE Asia and Australasia. It is closely related to the Sunda teal *Anas gibberifrons* from Indonesia, which is also cared for in Jersey.

Description

Madagascar teal are small, delicate looking ducks with relatively long necks. They measure about 40cm (16in) in length and weigh less than 450g (1lb). Adult males are slightly larger than females, as is common in ducks, but both sexes have the same plumage, which is mainly a soft, brown-grey colour. The underwing is grey with white feathers at the edges and the uppermost wing surface has a striking black band with white either side. The teal's bill, legs and feet are pinky-grey. They have relatively large chestnut eyes. Females make a quacking call and males emit a whistle.

Distribution and habitat

The teal has always been a bird of wetland areas on the west coast of Madagascar, but may once have ranged more across the island. Habitat use by the teal varies according to seasonal changes in weather conditions. During the dry season, they prefer shallow open water with no vegetation and are regularly sighted at rest during the day on sand bars in large rivers, estuaries and on the edges of mangrove forest. In the wet season they are usually found in flooded mangrove forest.

Feeding habits

Madagascar teal feed at exposed sites during the day and night, but are particularly active at dawn and dusk. They are believed to have a similar diet to other grey teal – aquatic invertebrates with some plant material, such as the seeds of water plants. They rarely swim while feeding, and prefer to wade in shallow water.

Breeding

Madagascar teal form pairs and breed in the wet season (December to March). In 1997 a Durrell researcher studying teal behaviour in the wild confirmed that they use shallow holes in the trunks of black mangrove trees as nest sites. This had been suspected, as closely related grey teal species are hole-nesters, but local knowledge had also suggested that the teal might also make nests on the forest floor, near

to water. Although there is no evidence for this, it is possible that a shortage of suitable tree holes may necessitate this behaviour, and also make the nests more prone to predation. Outside the breeding season teal are likely to be found in small, loose, flocks.

Other information on the reproductive behaviour of this species has been gathered from the birds cared for in Jersey. Madagascar teal are monogamous and highly territorial – the pair behave aggressively towards any intruders. In the breeding season the male guards his mate closely and around half a dozen eggs are laid and incubation takes slightly less than 4 weeks. As with other species of wildfowl, on birth the hatchlings are covered with a soft down and are well developed - they move and feed on their own. The ducklings gain adult plumage and are able to fly at about 6 weeks after hatching. Male teal are very protective of their own ducklings.

Conservation status

In 1985 The Madagascar teal was listed as Vulnerable on the Red Data List by The World Conservation Union, but has more recently been re-classified at the higher level of Endangered (IUCN 1996, 2000), which means that it faces a very high risk of extinction in the near future. Since 1975 the species has been listed under Appendix II of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), which affords it protection against any unregulated international trade (although so far this has not been a problem).

The spectacular and uncontrolled degradation of Madagascar's wetlands has undoubtedly been the main factor responsible for the teal's decline. The first survey of teal numbers was carried out in 1973 at Lake Bemamba, where an estimated population of about 120 birds was found. In 1992 a second survey, led by Glyn Young of Durrell's Bird Department, found only 16 teal at the same site. Although it is thought that the natural drying of Madagascan wetlands has been slowly causing a decrease in teal numbers for centuries, human activities have accelerated its decline to the extent of almost total eradication. Since the 1970s, more and more people have moved into the duck's habitat and used the land for rice cultivation. While some water birds adapt to living with human disturbance, the teal are very sensitive, and so when people arrive they are forced to leave.

The future

The information collected on the birds cared for in Jersey has dramatically improved the

knowledge of this species, which will be invaluable in formulating an effective conservation plan for the wild population. In New Zealand, a related teal species has been bred in captivity and then successfully used in reintroduction programmes. As the captive breeding programme for the Madagascar teal goes from strength to strength, it is hoped that such a scheme may be possible in the future. However, in Madagascar the teal's circumstances need to first be improved through community education projects and the protection of suitable habitat areas. The creation of protected areas that include nesting, moulting and non-breeding sites is essential. The installment of nest boxes is one way that the breeding efforts of wild birds may be boosted, but more research into the habits of both the wild and captive populations is still essential to secure the future of the species.

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