

Blue Duck / Whio

(*Hymenolaimus malacorhynchos*)

Introduction:

Blue ducks are found from the central North Island southwards. In the North Island they are found in some numbers on the Tongariro, Whakapapa and Manganuiaoteao Rivers and the streams and creeks that feed them. Named 'whio' by Maori after the distinctive whistling call of the male, the blue duck is one of New Zealand's ancient bird species. Scientists have in the past underestimated the flying ability of this species - not surprising given the ducks spend so much time in the water. When relocating several pairs of adult ducks from Ohakune to Mt. Taranaki, one pair traveled more than 100kms to return to their home territory in just a few days.



Vital Statistics:

Blue ducks mate for life, and once they mark out their territory (usually around 1km of river) they will remain there always. Males are renowned for their aggression and will defend their territory from rival males who enter. In fact, so definite are these boundaries that ducklings may be left by their parents to fend for themselves if they are swept downstream into neighbouring territory. When they have gained full plumage (at the end of the breeding season), the juveniles disperse in search of their own territory.

What makes it unique?

This white water specialist is New Zealand's only bird species that confines itself to the fast running rivers common at altitude. In order to cope with this unusual environment the blue duck has some unique adaptations. The upper jaw has a thick, semi circular 'lip' and the lower jaw recedes so that when the mouth is closed, the lower jaw tucks inside the upper allowing the top jaw to move evenly and closely across rocks as the animal feeds. The ducks also have large feet to help manoeuvre in the rapids. Torrent ducks (the general group to which blue ducks belong) are a rare breed; there are only four species in the world.

Conservation:

It has been difficult to gain an accurate count of the birds, but best estimates put the population at 2,000-4,000. Birds that are found by Department of Conservation staff are often tagged with plastic leg bands in order to identify them during later surveys. The thick stainless steel tags, which have an identification number stamped on, often require replacing within a year simply due to the amount of sediment that travels down the fast flowing rivers causing wear and tear. Birds from the well-populated Whakapapa River (in the central North Island) have been used as part of a repopulation programme in the Egmont National Park where blue duck had disappeared from the area through predation.