

A Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* in Australia

The Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* breeds at high latitudes across the Northern Hemisphere from Iceland and the British Isles through Scandinavia to Siberia, and northern and western parts of North America (Soothill & Whitehead 1978). In the Asian region, it migrates to India and South-East Asia including Borneo and Java (King et al. 1975; Mees 1971). Stragglers have reached New Guinea (Diamond 1976; Finch 1979), Bougainville (Skyrme 1981) and a number of Western Pacific Islands including Tonga and the Cook Islands (Pratt et al. 1987). The Northern Pintail has not previously been recorded in Australia.

Isolated subspecies of the Northern Pintail occur in the South Indian Ocean: *Anas acuta eatoni* is resident at Kerguelen, New Amsterdam and St Paul Islands and *Anas acuta drygalskii* is resident at Crozet Island (Soothill & Whitehead 1978; Todd 1979).

Ducks which breed at similar latitudes to the Northern Pintail and which have occurred in Australia are the Northern Shoveler *A. clypeata* (e.g. Close & Jaensch 1981) and Garganey *A. querquedula* (e.g. Serventy & Whittell 1976).

On 12 July 1986, G. Agar observed an unusual duck at Chandala Swamp Nature Reserve, 50 km north-north-east of Perth, Western Australia. Chandala Swamp is dominated by a forest of paperbark *Melaleuca raphiophylla* and in winter and spring, areas of open water persist where outer parts of the swamp have been cleared. Other wetland occurs in surrounding pasture in winter in the form of streams, drains and shallow pools. The area of wetland at Chandala Swamp varies from about 120 hectares in early spring to less than five hectares in early autumn. The swamp supports a breeding colony of about 1500 pairs of Straw-necked Ibises *Threskiornis spinicollis* and breeding by 19 other species of waterbirds (Jaensch in press). Surveys of waterbirds using the wetlands have been conducted by G. Agar since March 1982, generally every one or two months.

The unusual duck was first sighted at 1300 h in a flooded drain that was lined with paperbarks, in pasture near the east side of Chandala Swamp. It was with 20 Grey Teal *A. gibberifrons*, eight Pacific Black Ducks *A. superciliosa* and four Australasian Shovelers *A. rhynchotis*. At first, all that could be seen of the unusual duck was its long white neck (held erect) and dark head. It did not tolerate a close approach and flew off by itself. The bird was seen again at 1600 h beside open water at the edge of the Swamp, in the company of several Pacific Black Ducks. On this occasion a more complete view of the unusual duck was obtained, despite its timid behaviour. The following description was recorded before consulting references:

The unusual duck was approximately the size of a Pacific Black Duck but with a noticeably longer neck. Head and upper third of neck were grey-brown. Bill appeared bluish-grey from side on. Rest of neck and breast and abdomen were white. Back and upperwings were grey-brown with conspicuous darker markings on the back. In flight, the most obvious features were a pointed tail, long neck, narrow wings and rapid wing-beat. Underwing was white and light brown.

The sighting was investigated by R. Jaensch and R. Vervest on 15 July 1986 because they were confident that the description matched that of a male Northern Pintail. The unusual duck was subsequently found at the site of the first observation, despite heavy rainfall which had caused greater flooding in the drain since 12 July. The observers first noticed the unusual duck because of its white plumage, which was unlike that of any local waterfowl. After a few minutes, the unusual duck left the water and stood on a small island, with its neck fully erect. When approached more closely it took

to flight with Pacific Black Ducks and Australasian Shovelers and after several passes overhead was not seen again. From these observations, additional points of description were noted as follows:

Broad white crescent on lower flank was bordered by grey scale-like marks on upper flank and by black under-tail coverts. Dark tail included two thin central streamers, which were conspicuous in flight. Scapulars were black with pale edges. White of chest extended in a narrowing curve into the side of the dark head, to a point behind the face.

The above descriptions left no doubt that the unusual duck was a male Northern Pintail *A. acuta acuta* as described by Soothill & Whitehead (1978) and others. In addition, R. Jaensch was familiar with the Northern Pintail from his travels in Europe and Asia. The long neck, slender pointed wings and pointed tail, together with swift flight and rapid wing beats are regarded as characteristic of the Northern Pintail, such that it should be unmistakable in the air (Soothill & Whitehead 1987). Females and juveniles of the nominate subspecies and both sexes of the two subantarctic subspecies of the Northern Pintail are plain in appearance, mostly brown in colour.

The Northern Pintail at Chandala Swamp in July 1986 may have travelled southward to Australia from southern Asia in March or April, instead of making the usual northward migration. Given that next to the Mallard *A. platyrhynchos*, the Northern Pintail is the most abundant species of duck in the holarctic region (Soothill & Whitehead 1978), with up to ten million birds in North America alone (Todd 1979), the accidental arrival of this species in Australia should not be surprising. Frequent occurrence at Pacific Islands (e.g. Hawaii, Micronesia: Pratt et al. 1987) has demonstrated that the Northern Pintail is a long-distance migrant and is therefore capable of reaching Australia.

Other abundant ducks which migrate as far south as Indonesia (King et al. 1975) and which therefore may occur in Australia include the Eurasian Wigeon *A. penelope* and Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*.

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