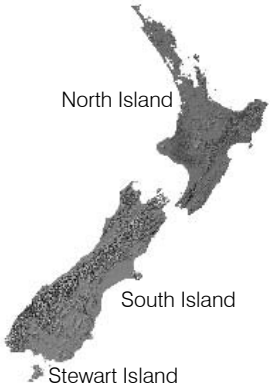
Subantarctic teal

Native birds



The Cambell Island teal and Auckland Island teal are the remaining members of New Zealand's subantarctic teal group, those formerly on the Chatham and Macquarie islands being now extinct. They are similar in appearance and resemble the mainland brown teal, or pāteke, from which they are derived. The females in both species are a uniform brown while the male has an iridescent green head during the breeding season.

Due to their isolated habitats, few people have ever seen these small ducks in the wild. They are mainly nocturnal and are usually secretive but can be seen basking in the sun during the day. Although they are flightless, they do have small wings and can make a speedy getaway by running rapidly across the ground or water at the first sign of danger.

Where are they found?

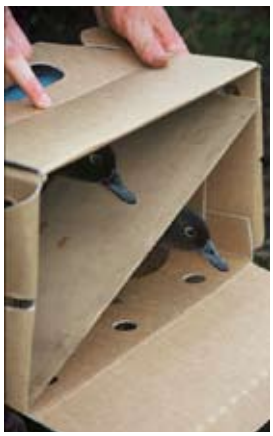
Both species of subantarctic teal are found only on New Zealand's subantarctic islands. Auckland Island teal have disappeared from the main Auckland Island, due to the presence of cats and pigs, but can still be found in good numbers on many of the smaller islands in that group. It is estimated that less than 1000 of these birds remain in the wild, but they are still much more common than their critically endangered cousins.

The Campbell Island teal is New Zealand's rarest duck species. Once thought to be extinct, a remnant population of no more than 25 pairs was discovered on 26-hectare Dent Island, an offshore islet of Campbell Island, in 1972. The species was probably widespread on the main Campbell Island prior to the introduction of Norway rats in the early nineteenth century, but disappeared once rats and cats were introduced. Dent Island is free of mammalian predators. A captive breeding programme and the eradication of the rats has now allowed the teal to be reintroduced to the main island for the first time in 200 years.

Auckland Island teal R. Morris

Southern Islands Area Office
Published by
Department of Conservation
Christchurch
2006
NS0084

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai



H. Grummer

Tracking Auckland Island teal G. Sherley

Subantarctic teal can live in a wide range of habitats including dense tussock grassland and megaherb communities, tidal zones and freshwater streams and pools.

Subantarctic teal facts

- Both of the subantarctic teal species are flightless. At 300–500 g, they are significantly smaller than other ducks.
- Subantarctic teal eat a variety of invertebrates (including worms, snails, weevils, fly larvae and crustaceans), as well as some seeds and aquatic weeds such as sea-lettuce.
- They may forage on the ground, roaming in grassland or on the forest floor, or dabble in freshwater and shallow seawater. They are often found at night feeding in the intertidal zone, when rock platforms and beds of kelp are exposed. Diving has been observed on occasion.
- For Campbell Island teal, breeding in the wild was first observed on Whenua Hou/ Codfish Island, when captive bred birds were released to establish a temporary backup population.
- Both species lay 3–5 creamy white eggs between December–January (earlier in captivity). The nest is a bowl of grass under logs or dense vegetation such as sedges, ferns or tussocks.
- The Auckland Island teal remain in pairs and guard their territories all year.
- Males give soft, high-pitched wheezy whistles and popping calls, while females give low quacks and growls.

Did you know?

The huge success of captive breeding programmes for the Campbell Island teal is slowly bringing the species back from the brink of extinction. Captive breeding of this species has been a major challenge, because its breeding behaviour and nesting activity had never been observed in the wild.

A breakthrough occurred in 1994 when three pairs of birds at Mount Bruce Wildlife Centre, formerly each housed separately, were placed in a single aviary to allow social contact typical of the wild, and one pair bred. By March 2000 the captive population had risen to 60 birds.

Some of these captive-raised birds were released onto Whenua Hou/Codfish Island in order to establish a second 'insurance' population. A heartening 88% of the birds survived, which showed that transfer from captivity to a predator-free wild environment could be achieved. From these results, managers decided that releases onto the main Campbell Island direct from captivity were possible.

In 2001, Campbell Island became the biggest island in the world to have rats successfully eradicated from it. With rats and all other alien mammals gone, it was time for the teal to return home. In September 2004, 28 birds bred at Mt Bruce and Peacock Springs near Christchurch were flown to Invercargill where they were joined by 22 birds from Whenua Hou /Codfish Island. They were then driven to Bluff where they were put on a boat for the 40-hour trip to Campbell Island. It was a journey of a lifetime for these birds, and indeed for the entire species. The teal now has the chance to recover and live once more on Campbell Island. A further 55 birds were released on Campbell Island in September 2005 and it is hoped that other releases will follow. A monitoring programme is in place to check for breeding and how the population is going.

Threats

Subantarctic teal declined when mammals arrived with people who were visiting the islands. Introduced predators such as cats and rats eliminated teal from many areas of their former range within the island groups.

Accidental introduction of predators to remaining teal habitats would almost certainly result in the complete extinction of Campbell Island teal and in local extinctions of Auckland Island teal populations.

The isolation of the subantarctic islands means that both species are also vulnerable to the introduction of diseases.

The Department has strict quarantine measures in place to minimise the risk of unwanted organisms becoming established on any of the islands.

Further information

www.mtbruce.org.nz
www.doc.govt.nz

The Subantarctic Teal Recovery Plan is now out of print and copies are only available through libraries.

Campbell Island teal D. Veitch