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Birds of New Zealand - Locality Guide. 3rd edn.

Arun Books, Orewa, New Zealand.

Blue duck: pp 107-109.



BLUE DUCK

Family Anatidae

Species *Hymenolaimus malacorhynchus*

Common name Blue Duck, Whio

Status Endemic

Size 530 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, Mallard 580 mm)

Habitat Confined to clear water, forested, mountain rivers in secluded areas away from interference. Birds will extend territories into river stretches which are bordered by pastureland but they never seem to venture for long away from the security of forested river-banks. Some birds, probably unmated juveniles, turn up on lakes and ponds away from mountain rivers over winter.

New Zealand range In the North Island, confined to the forested rivers in the central North Island. South Island birds are confined to similar habitats on the western side of the Southern Alps and into eastern areas of Fiordland.

Discussion The Blue Duck is a unique New Zealand endemic river duck in its

own genus of *Hymenolaimus*. It has been separated from “dabbling” ducks (*Anas spp.*) because of special physical adaptations to the environments of high country rivers. These adaptations are associated with bill shape, feeding habits and feet size. Fleming (1982) writes: “The Blue Duck may have originated as a mid-Tertiary segregate from early dabbling ducks, but its specialised features probably evolved as the mountains were generated in the late Tertiary and especially during the Quaternary”.

It is a species which has adapted to living and feeding among the white waters of mountain rivers where it feeds on a soft diet of river insect larvae and under-stone algae. Its bill is soft and pliable with upper mandible flaps that protect the lower mandible. Captain Cook described this bill as: “soft and of a skinny or more properly cartilaginous substance”.

They are a strongly territorial species living on set stretches of river from which they seldom move. Territories are about 1 km of river long. In time, young fledgling birds are driven from these territories by their parents. This act must cause considerable numbers to perish, as territories uninhabited by Blue Duck on suitable mountain rivers, are diminishing resources.

Description

Upperparts Grey with bluish tinge. **Breast** Reddish spotting over grey. **Abdomen and undertail** Grey. **Bill** Off-white. **Eye** Iris, yellow. **Legs and feet** Brown. Ducklings are born with disproportionately large feet to enable them to swim strongly in turbulent waters from birth.

Conspicuous features

- Larger than a Shoveler.
- Pale bill stands out.
- Upper mandible flaps on tip of bill make it different from other ducks.
- Yellow eye.

Conspicuous characteristics

- Birds are always in pairs when on river territories.
- Single birds do turn up on ponds and lakes away from normal breeding habitats.
- Swimming birds often hold tail upright.
- When feeding, birds are regularly seen with tails up and heads under the water. They also stand and dabble.
- Are quiet by nature and prefer to swim away from disturbance rather than fly.
- Tend to venture out and feed in early morning and late afternoon, while hiding away among overhanging river vegetation by day. However, daytime sightings are not uncommon.

Call Male bird a loud whistle – “whio” (wh is f in Maori). Female birds answer

with a harsh “craak craak”. Usually they call at dusk or dawn.

Nest A bowl of grass lined with down under a log or in dense vegetation. Up to 6 cream eggs are laid.

Where to find – North Island

Waikaremoana – At the Hopuruahine Stream. P. 327.

Waikaremoana – Lake Waikareiti Track near the Park Headquarters. P. 328.

King Country – Pureora Forest. Enquire at the Park Headquarters. P. 314

King Country – Ongarue River from the upper end of Ongarue Stream Road.

Central Plateau – Waihaha River near Tihoi. P. 316.

Tongariro National Park – Desert Road. Most of the roads which run east towards the Kaimanawa ranges off the Desert Road. P. 317.

Tongariro National Park – Whakapapa River near the Chateau. P. 317.

Tongariro National Park – Whakapapa intake. P. 317.

Tongariro – Raetihi on the Maunganui Atea River. P. 317.

Bay of Plenty – Waioeka Gorge where Redpath Road crosses the Waioeka River.

Where to find – South Island

Fiordland – Eglinton Valley, Wesley Creek before Knobs Flat. P. 370.

Fiordland – Falls Creek after The Divide. P. 370.

Fiordland – Hollyford River and Monkey Creek. P. 371.

Westland – Arthurs Pass at Pegleg Creek. Walk upstream. P. 348.