

Biodiversity



Number 11

Blue duck (*Hymenolaimus malacorhynchos*)

DESCRIPTION

The blue duck or whio is slate blue with speckled chestnut breast feathers and green-tinged head feathers. It has grey legs, a pinkish-white bill with a black tip and yellow irises. Their coloration gives them camouflage against broken or glistening water, rocks and logs.



Usually growing up to 530mm long and weighing 900g, males are slightly heavier than females at around 750g.

DISTRIBUTION, BREEDING AND FEEDING

Formerly widespread throughout the North and South Island, the blue duck is now restricted mostly to forested and backcountry areas. Its preferred habitats are rivers with steep gradients but it can be found at the head of fiords and the edges of mountain lakes, though rivers are always close by.

Blue duck are specialised whitewater feeders feeding mainly at dusk and dawn on aquatic insects. The usual breeding age is two years or older. Birds maintain pair-bonds and vigorously defend their territory all year round. Nesting occurs between August and December, with sites including hollow logs, rock clefts, cave ledges and clumps of vegetation. Nests usually contain four to nine eggs, but the duckling mortality rate is high due to predation and flooding. Their average lifespan in the wild is seven to eight years and some have been known to live up to 12 years.

BLUE DUCK IN TARANAKI

Mt Taranaki provides a good habitat, and a population has been established under an experimental project which released more than 100 whio on the mountain in the past 10 years. At least 30 ducklings hatched in the wild during the 2012/13 breeding season. There is a small number of whio in East Taranaki, although these unmanaged populations are mainly in decline.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- Do not disturb nesting birds. Minimise water recreation activities in known blue duck areas during their breeding season.
- Limit deforestation and hydro-electric development in stretches of river that support blue duck.
- Set traps on your property to control predators where blue duck are present.
- Retire and plant river and streamside riparian vegetation to enhance and maintain water quality.
- Report sightings to the Taranaki Regional Council or the Ornithological Society NZ Regional Representative Barry Hartley (barry_hartley@xtra.co.nz).



CONSERVATION

The blue duck is an endemic New Zealand species and is listed as 'threatened'. There are major conservation efforts to stem the rapid decline of the small, fragmented populations.

THREATS

Threats to this species include:

- Habitat loss and degradation, mainly due to hydro-electric developments or poor catchment management.
- Predation by introduced species.

QUICK FACTS

- Ducklings are hatched with disproportionately large feet which help them swim against strong currents.
- After breeding, the full moult renders whio flightless for around six weeks between December and May.
- The Maori name is whio.
- The presence of blue duck indicates good stream health.
- They can dive under water for up to 20 seconds.
- Blue duck are a protected species.

