

# Our Diminishing Heritage

The Freckled Duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*) is typical of much of our fauna in that it occurs only in Australia and is of outstanding interest to science. Dr H. J. Frith, who has made a study of it, considers it to be one of the most primitive members of the waterfowl family, and that it is possibly close to the ancient progenitor from which all the modern ducks, geese and swans evolved.

Freckled Ducks have been recorded in many parts of the continent, but are only found regularly in south-east Australia and the south-west of Western Australia. During the breeding season they are to be found in densely-vegetated swamps; in the non-breeding season movements are nomadic and their range extends considerably, particularly under drought conditions.

Breeding normally takes place from September to December, but records indicate that like other inland species, the Freckled Duck will also breed at other times when there is high rainfall or flood conditions. In Western Australia at Benger Swamp, this bird breeds slightly later in the year (October to December); Benger Swamp floods annually, and breeding regularly follows this seasonal pattern.

In 1969, the Freckled Duck was a game bird in every State except New South Wales. Western Australia declared it a protected species for the 1970, and subsequent duck shooting seasons. *The Duck Shooter's Guide* annually asks shooters to conserve the Freckled Duck, and thousands of illustrated leaflets have been distributed throughout the State drawing attention to the precarious status of the bird.



Freckled Duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*). Showing the obvious freckled appearance

Despite this publicity, reports were and still are received of Freckled Ducks being shot "accidentally". H. J. Frith in *Waterfowl in Australia* offers the opinion that . . . "Although it is very distinctive in flight, many shooters claim inability to recognize it . . . A skilled shooter who knows his ducks and selects the bird he wishes to shoot in a flock never seems to secure Freckled Ducks".

Indications are that the Freckled Duck population continues to diminish. In an attempt to prevent virtual extinction in this State, the Western Australian Wildlife Authority recently recommended that the bird be declared "a rare and endangered species". The notice declaring the additional protection of the Freckled Duck appeared in the *Government Gazette* on March 17, 1972. The maximum penalty for illegally taking this bird is thereby increased from \$400 to \$1,000, and this should impress on shooters the need to take special care in identification.

Illegal shooting is only part of the problem. Dr T. Riggert, the Department's Senior Waterfowl Research Officer, feels that the Freckled Duck is endangered mainly through the tremendous reduction of Western Australia's wetlands. The prime wetland areas extend from the coast to approximately 150 miles inland in the South-West Land Division and 50 miles inland in the Eucla Land Division. The wetlands within these two land divisions vary greatly; but the majority of the areas are either brackish or saltwater. Freshwater wetlands are generally limited to the coastal areas with only a few containing water throughout the summer months. **The breeding habitat of the Freckled Duck appears to be restricted to fresh water.**

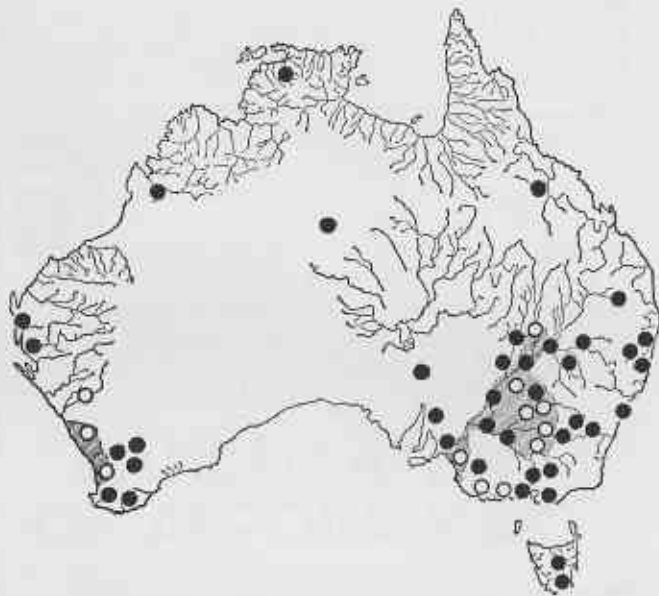
The problem therefore is twofold. Reduction of habitat is certainly the major cause of the diminishing numbers of Freckled Ducks. Add to this the pressures of illegal shooting and we could see the extinction of this species in Western Australia. In addition to rearing birds in captivity, another solution would be to obtain more information on the breeding areas of the Freckled Duck, collate this information, and create more waterfowl sanctuaries. The Department's Waterfowl Research Section considers this work to be high on the priority list for future research. Honorary Fauna Wardens and duck shooters can help by providing much needed information on the numbers, habits and distribution of the Freckled Duck. If you see one, and are sure of your identification, please report the time, date and place of sighting, and any observations of interest to Dr T. Riggert, c/- Waterfowl Research, Department of Fisheries and Fauna, 108 Adelaide Terrace, Perth.

# FRECKLED DUCK

## *Stictonetta naevosa*



The Freckled Duck floats higher in the water than other common ducks



**Distribution.** Solid dots indicate recorded sightings. Open circles refer to breeding records. Shaded areas show where Freckled Ducks are found, even if in small numbers, at all times in most years

### DISTRIBUTION:

Breeding range is virtually restricted to south-east Australia and the extreme south-west of Western Australia.

During non-breeding season ducks may be found almost anywhere on the waters of inland Australia.

### HABITAT:

When breeding—mainly confined to swamps with dense vegetation.

When not breeding—may be found in most other inland wetland habitats.

### LOOKS:

Male—very dark; head and neck almost black, elsewhere very dark brown uniformly freckled (finely speckled) with white or buff.

Female—lighter colouration than male; light brown on most of body, darker on head and neck; freckles—pale buff.

Iris—brown.

Legs and feet—slate grey.

Bill—slate grey. Males have red base to the bill during breeding season.

### SIZE:

Adult male: Length—22 in. (556 mm) average.  
Wingspread—32½ in. (822 mm) average.

Adult female: Length—20 in. (508 mm) average.  
Wingspread—31 in. (784 mm) average.

### WEIGHT:

Male—34 oz. (969 g) average.

Female—29 oz. (842 g) average.

### NESTING:

Normally September to December, but birds can breed at other times, dependent on favourable climatic conditions. During breeding season pairs remain isolated; when not breeding birds are gregarious in nature.

Clutch size—varies from 5 to 14 eggs; average 7.

Eggs—cream or ivory; glossy and smooth; shell thick and softer than other duck eggs.

### DIET:

Algae; aquatic grasses; seeds of aquatic plants, sedges, nardoo, clovers and thistles; plankton; insects.