



No.26 Australian shelduck

The Australian shelduck (*Tadorna tadornoides*) is also known as the mountain duck and is found in southern mainland Australia and Tasmania. The Australian shelduck is common in the southern farmlands of Western Australia where it is a declared pest of agriculture.

Description

Australian shelducks are 55-72 centimetres in length and weigh 1,020-2,040 grams. They are brightly coloured, large-bodied ducks with small heads and beaks.

Males have black feathers tinged with green on the neck and head, with a white collar around the base of the neck (Figure 1). The breast and mantle are orange-brown or cinnamon and the rest of the underparts are blackish brown to black (Figure 1). Females have a white ring around the eye and the base of the beak and a chestnut-coloured breast. Immature birds are similar in appearance to females but have more white around the eye. Both males and females have a speculum (the upper surfaces of the wing feathers closest to the body) that is large and shiny-green with black at the margins.

Male shelducks give a strange deep 'zizzing' grunt. Females produce a higher-pitched resounding 'ong gank, ong gank' or a strident 'ow ow ow' call in flight.

Distribution and habitat

In Western Australia, Australian shelducks have a large range south of the Tropic of Capricorn and east to Lake Carnegie, Laverton and Eucla (Figure 2). In the remaining parts of the state, they are casual visitors. Shelducks are commonly found in estuaries and salty or brackish lakes but are also found on freshwaters (farm dams), sheltered seas and wet paddocks.

This species has greatly increased in number since the establishment of the wheatbelt, which has increased food supplies near the bird's main breeding areas (lakes of the interior).

Diet

The Australian shelduck grazes on seeds, tubers, grasses, cereal and vegetable crops. It also consumes a variety of insects and molluscs. The birds search for food in short grass, as well as up-ending their bodies in shallow water. On Rottnest Island, brine shrimps are an important food.



Figure 1 Australian shelduck (*Tadorna tadornoides*) male (Photo Babs and Bert Wells/DEC).

Breeding

Shelducks usually breed on fresh waters and salt lakes which have been freshened with soaks or flood waters. The lakes may be inland or on islands like Rottnest and Carnac. Pairs vigorously defend their breeding territory which may cover a whole dam or a portion of a large water body. Pairs probably remain together for life.

Between May and October, 5-24 eggs are laid in a eucalypt or sandbank hollow and the female incubates the eggs for 30-32 days. Eggs may also occasionally be laid on the ground, in hollow stumps, in limestone caves or on island cliff ledges. The birds often return to the same nesting site year after year. During this time, the male defends a separate territory, where the young will be reared, which may be some distance from the nest site. When the ducklings are about two days old, they are led to this territory by their parents.

Behaviour

Unlike other Australian waterfowl, Australian shelducks often fly in long lines or 'V' formations. They are usually found in pairs or family groups in the breeding season and in large flocks of 100, up to thousands, between October and May. Flocks of thousands of birds have been recorded on inland lakes where they rest on the water, unable to fly during the annual replacement of their wing feathers.

When the birds leave their large summer flocks, they disperse in all

directions, sometimes moving hundreds of kilometres

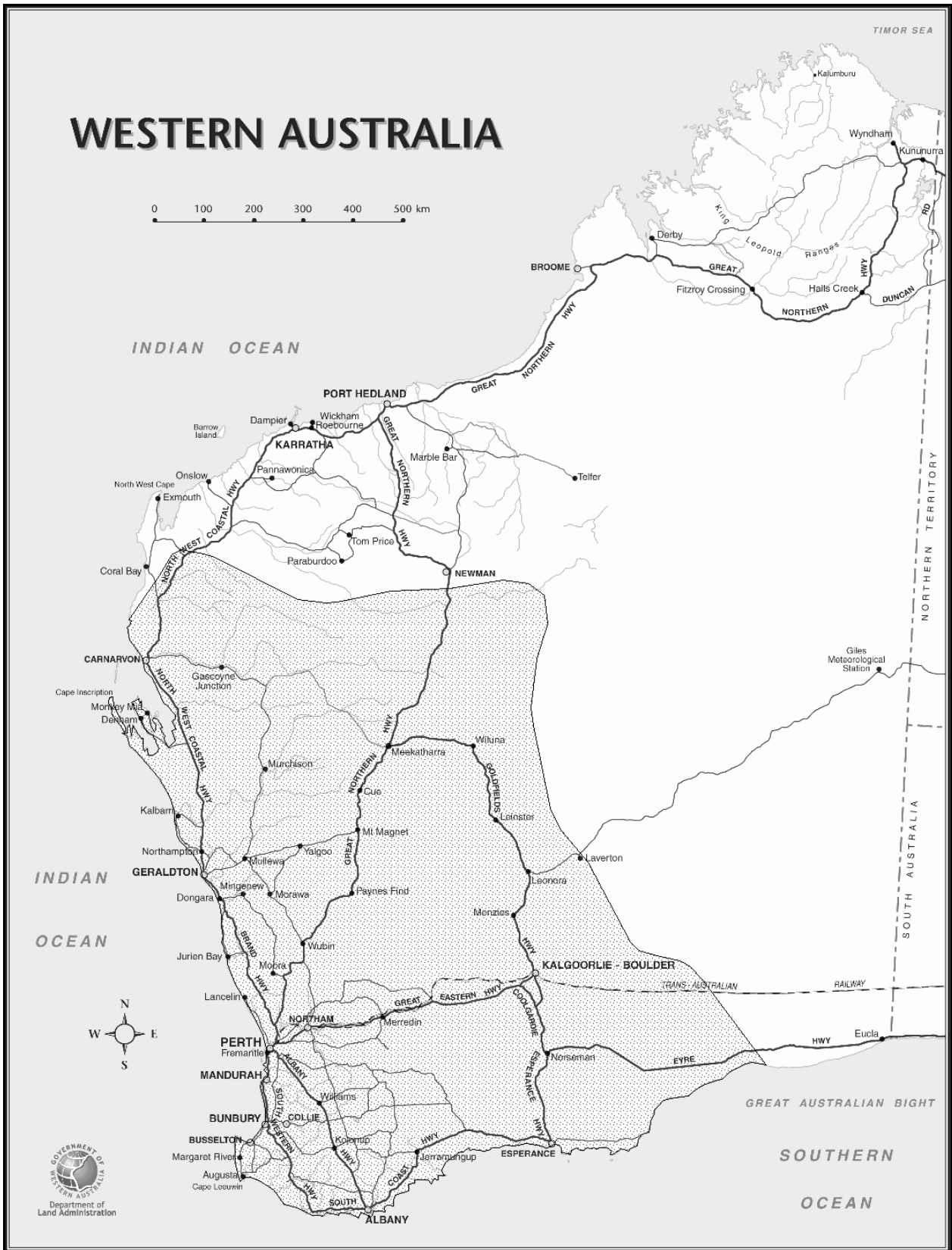


Figure 2 Distribution of the Australian shelduck (*Tadorna tadornoides*) in Western Australia (Adapted from Johnstone and Storr (1998)).

Damage

Shelducks sometimes take the seeds and shoots of young cereal and legume crops and can cause damage to vegetable crops. They can also foul pasture, dams and other areas with their droppings. Much of this damage is seasonal.

Status and damage Reduction

The Australian shelduck is a declared pest of agriculture under the provisions of the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*, administered by the Western Australian Department of Agriculture and Food. This declaration allows for the approval and implementation of a management program in various areas of the state.

As a native species, the Australian shelduck is protected under the provisions of the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*, administered by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). Under this Act shelducks can be shot on private land between the 1 January and the 30 June each year in accordance with a restricted open season notice, without the need to obtain a damage licence from DEC. The area covered by the notice comprises the south-west land division and Eucla division but excludes the Perth metropolitan region and the district of Mandurah. Shelduck populations in this area are secure and damage to agriculture is likely to be a continual problem.

Outside the open season area and dates, a damage licence from must be obtained from DEC prior to shooting. For more information contact DEC and refer to Fauna note no. 10 Destruction of birds to reduce damage. DEC, Western Australia. Destruction should be viewed as a last resort after all other control options have been attempted.

For management options see the table below. A strategy comprising a number of techniques will probably be needed to reduce damage caused by ducks.

Further reading

- Fauna note no. 9. Destruction of birds to reduce damage. DEC, Western Australia.

References

Bomford, M. and Sinclair, R. (2002) Australian research on bird pests: impact, management and future directions. *Emu* 102: 29-45.

Morecombe, M. (2000). *Field Guide to Australian Birds*. Steve Parish Publishing, Archerfield.

Johnstone, R. E. and Storr, G. M. (1998). *Handbook of Western Australian Birds*. Volume 1. Non-passerines. WA Museum, Perth.

Last updated 25 June 2009

Curtin, A. L. and Kingsford, R. T. (1997). An analysis of the problem of ducks on rice in New South Wales. National Parks and Wildlife Service, NSW, Final Research Report.

Barker, R. D. and Vestjens, W. J. M. (1990). *The Food of Australian Birds*. 1. Non-Passerines. CSIRO, Melbourne.

Blakers, M., Davies, S. J. J. F. and Reilly, P. N. (1984). *The Atlas of Australian Birds*. RAOU and Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Further information

Contact your local DEC office .

See the department's website for the latest information:
www.dec.wa.gov.au.

Further Information

Contact your local office of the Department of Environment and Conservation.

See the Department's website for the latest information: www.dec.wa.gov.au.



Department of
Environment and Conservation
Our environment, our future 

Disclaimer: This publication may be of assistance to you but the State of Western Australia and its officers do not guarantee that the publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence which may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.