

The Ruddy Shelduck in Britain

A review

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ABSTRACT The BOU Records Committee has reviewed early British records of Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, including those up to 1892, and post-1950 sightings, in particular those relating to the 1994 influx. None of the pre-1892 records was accepted, but those which occurred in 1892 were considered to justify the species' retention in Category B of the British List. None of the post-1950 records was accepted. The probability that records of this species relate to individuals of feral or captive origin is very high, yet vagrancy remains possible and is perhaps most likely to involve males in their second calendar-year.

* On behalf of the British Ornithologists' Union Records



The position of any species on the British List ultimately rests on the unequivocally accepted identification, and wild origin, of at least one individual: the first record. Following the evidence provided by Jessop (1999), that the earliest British record of Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, at Blandford, Dorset, in winter 1776, involved, in fact, a misidentified Cape Shelduck *T. cana*, the Records Committee of the British Ornithologists' Union undertook a formal review to determine the earliest acceptable record (BOU 2001). At the same time, following the alleged influx of wild Ruddy Shelducks in 1994 (Vinicombe & Harrop 1999; Duff 2001), BOURC undertook to review post-1950 records, in particular those from 1994, to ascertain whether any of these merit inclusion in Category A of the British List.

Ageing, sexing and movements

Ruddy Shelducks can be aged in the hand by examination of the tips of the tail feathers (which are pointed on adults, while those of juveniles are notched and have the shafts exposed), and can be sexed by cloacal examination, but ageing and sexing in the field are much more difficult. The most reliable feature for ageing immatures is the presence of grey, not white, greater coverts, which are retained until the summer of the second calendar-year (Cramp & Simmons 1977, and confirmed by reference to skins in the Natural History Museum, Tring). The greater coverts are, however, often concealed when the birds are at rest, and are most likely to be seen when they are preening, or on take-off. The buff tips of juvenile tail feathers are difficult to use reliably, since worn and faded adult tail feathers can also show buff fringes.

Sexing immatures in the field is not recommended. Adult females can sometimes be distinguished from non-breeding males (which lack a black ring around the lower neck) if they show a whitish patch at the base of the bill and around the eye, and by darker inner webs of the inner tertials. Individuals do vary, however, and females from Siberia and other parts of the species' range in Asia apparently lack white face patches (Anastasia Popovkina *in litt.*).

In Ukraine, juveniles begin to fly in the middle of July (Igor Gorbań *in litt.*), and moult-migration (presumably of both adults and immatures) takes place at the end of July. Adults moulting their remiges are flightless for about

four weeks between mid July and September (Cramp & Simmons 1977). In Moscow and Askania-Nova, young Ruddy Shelducks remain in broods until late autumn or even during their first winter, often accompanied by their parents (Anastasia Popovkina *in litt.*).

Evidence concerning the dispersal of Ruddy Shelducks reintroduced in Ukraine and Bulgaria has been documented by Zubko *et al.* (1998) and Bogdanova & Zehindjiev (2000), while data from Ukraine were summarised in Duff (2001). The reintroduction project in Bulgaria began in 1996, and in autumn 1997 three of the released birds migrated south to Greece, where they were observed in the Evros delta in November. Findings to date suggest that females are strongly attached to their natal territory while males disperse more widely.

It seems probable, therefore, that those Ruddy Shelducks which are most prone to vagrancy will be males in their second calendar-year, when, by analogy with Common Shelduck *T. tadorna* (Cramp & Simmons 1977), males are likely to be unpaired. Immature Common Shelducks begin their moult-migration in June, with adults following in July.

The first British record

After formal rejection of the 1776 record, examination of subsequent records during the early and middle parts of the nineteenth century (for example, those listed by Harting 1901) led to the conclusion that they were not acceptable, either because they were inadequately documented or because their provenance was questionable, as, for example, when the possibility of captive origin was very high. In the late nineteenth century, several authors (notably Vyse 1892 and Anon. 1896) referred to known escapes, or the likelihood that apparently wild birds were in reality escapes. In these circumstances, the 1892 influx was considered to be the only substantial reason for the retention of Ruddy Shelduck in Category B.

The 1892 influx has already been discussed by Ogilvie (1892) and Vinicombe & Harrop (1999). During the course of the review, the following 1892 records, not mentioned by those authors, were found: three killed at Braunton, Devon, in June (Evans 1892); 'some' said to have been shot at Woolacombe Sands, Devon, in September (Gould 1892); and one shot at Widnes, Lancashire, on 9th October (Oldham 1905). Unfortunately, the Committee was



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60. Case no. 85 of the Ogilvie Collection, now in Ipswich Museum, containing adult male Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* (left), with apparent second-calendar-year male (centre) and female (right). All shot at Thorpe Mere, Suffolk, in July/August 1892.

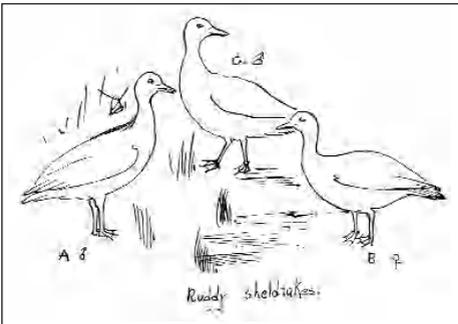


Fig. 1. Entry from Ogilvie's undated manuscript *Index to Collection of Birds* (Ipswich Museum), and sketch of the respective positions of the Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* specimens in case no. 85 (see plates 60-62).

unable to locate any descriptions supporting the 1892 records, and the only extant specimens traced are three of the individuals at Thorpe Mere, Suffolk (Ipswich Corporation Museum 1928; Frost 1989), which are on public display in Ipswich Museum.

Fortunately, both Ogilvie himself and his taxidermist, T. E. Gunn of Norwich, maintained exemplary standards of documentation. The birds are in case no. 85 of the Ogilvie Collection, and their provenance is established beyond doubt by Ogilvie's manuscript index, which includes a sketch of their respective positions in the case (fig. 1). Since the case is sealed, it is not possible to handle the specimens, but they appear to be in good condition. Specimen A was shot on 5th July, specimen B on 3rd August, and specimen C on 8th August. After examining the birds in the hand, Ogilvie considered them to comprise two males (A & C) and a

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61. Apparent second-calendar-year female Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, shot at Thorpe Mere, Suffolk, on 8th August 1892. Ogilvie Collection, Ipswich Museum.

female (B), possibly all in their second calendar-year. Measurements and details of feather wear cannot now be checked, yet it is possible to draw conclusions from what can be seen of the mounted specimens.

The two males can be sexed by their having a

slightly longer bill and legs and more uniform head than the female, which (though slightly faded) has a whitish face and more extensive brown mottling on the crown. The female's tertials have dark inner webs, while those of the males are frayed. As specimens in the NHM

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62. Apparent second-calendar-year male Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, shot at Thorpe Mere, Suffolk, on 3rd August 1892. Ogilvie Collection, Ipswich Museum.

which were obtained in the wild also have notably frayed tertials, this should not be considered a sign of captive origin. Specimen A is, in fact, an adult, since it has both adult tail feathers and white greater coverts, while the other two appear to combine adult tail feathers with grey greater coverts, and were thus in their second calendar-year when obtained (as Ogilvie suggested). Since the primaries of the males appear worn and faded, they had presumably not been moulted when the birds were obtained. Those of the female seem to be fresher.

The first record during the 1892 influx was of five individuals at Durness, Sutherland, on 20th June. Since the only extant British specimens from that year had been correctly identified, and since there are also existing specimens from Iceland and Greenland which were collected during 1892, the Committee felt that it would be inappropriate to reject the other records from that year. The provenance of those involved in the 1892 influx was discussed by Ogilvie (1892), whose conclusion that they were wild became widely accepted and cited. The Committee also agreed with his conclusion, for three main reasons. First, two of the flocks in 1892 (14 in Sutherland and 'about 20' in Donegal) were larger than any of those recorded in Fennoscandia in 1994. Secondly, the timing of the 1892 influx into Britain & Ireland was similar to the timing of the influx into Fennoscandia in 1994. Thirdly, there were no further Icelandic records until 1999 (Gunnlaugur Pétursson *in litt.*), so that those in that country in 1892 were certainly exceptional. The five at Durness thus become the first British record of Ruddy Shelduck.

1892 specimens from Iceland and Greenland

Since there are so few extant British specimens from 1892, a request for information about other specimens from the 1892 influx was made to the Association of European Rarities Committees. Gunnlaugur Pétursson and Jon Fjeldsá kindly provided data concerning three in Iceland and another three in Greenland.

All three Icelandic birds were considered most likely to be males. RM474 in the Icelandic Museum of Natural History is in poor condition, but the wings indicate that it is an adult, while the bill length of 47 mm strongly indicates a male. ZM69.980 and ZM69.981 are both in the Zoological Museum in Copenhagen; the

first has a bill length of 42 mm and tarsus length of 62 mm (clearly a male), while the second has a bill length of 47 mm and tarsus length of 57 mm. The collector of ZM69.981 has stated in print that it was a male.

The three individuals which reached Greenland were, however, considered to be females. Although the only information on the labels of the specimens is the collector's name (Fencher) and the respective accession numbers, the birds are smaller than the Icelandic ones and have a distinctive white face. Since both these and the female specimen from Suffolk have a white face, they are unlikely to have come from the eastern part of the species' range (*contra* Vinicombe & Harrop 1999).

1994 'influx'

Regrettably, the Committee did not receive a single description in support of the 1994 records, despite a request to the County Recorders of Cheshire and Cornwall, nor was any information about the age and/or sex of those individuals forthcoming. Nonetheless, the evidence presented by Vinicombe & Harrop (1999) was reviewed.

Despite the very high probability of the occurrence of captive or feral birds, members of the Committee were receptive to the possibility that some genuine vagrants may occur, at least occasionally. Admission to Category A was not, however, felt to be justified, for four main reasons. First, as previously noted by Vinicombe & Harrop (1999), the total number of Ruddy Shelducks reported in Britain & Ireland in 1994 was not greater than in other years during the early 1990s. Secondly, the pattern of records, with the largest flocks recorded in northwest and southwest England, does not suggest an arrival from Fennoscandia, where exceptional numbers were recorded in 1994. Thirdly, the pattern of monthly occurrence was similar to that during the period 1965-79 (Rogers 1982). Fourthly, the largest flock recorded (up to 12 in Flintshire/Cheshire/Wirral) was thought likely to have included one or two escaped birds which had been in the area for several years (Vinicombe & Harrop 1999), and certainly included one with a red colour-ring. Moreover, the flock of up to six in Cornwall/Scilly/Devon occurred over a month later than the main influx into Fennoscandia, which was during July-August.

Since there was an influx of apparently wild

Ruddy Shelducks into Fennoscandia in 1994, the possibility that wild individuals of this species occasionally reach Britain remains. The Committee agreed, therefore, to place post-1950 records in Category D. Observers who encounter this species in circumstances which suggest that genuine vagrants may be involved are encouraged to make every effort to establish the age and sex of each individual, and to submit this information to the relevant County Recorder. The information thus compiled will be most helpful to the Committee during any subsequent review.

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