

## Madagascar Pochard (*Aythya innotata*)

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### ABOUT THE STUDY

Extremely rare diving duck that was long thought extinct before being rediscovered in 2006 in a remote site in northern Madagascar. A large duck that is mostly rich brown, with white under the tail. Shows a conspicuous white wing stripe in flight. Males have a pale eye and females a dark one. Lives on freshwater lakes and wetlands. Dives frequently, like a grebe, but is much larger. Lacks the pale face of White-faced Whistling-Duck. Smaller than Meller's Duck, with darker brown coloration and white under the tail.

The Madagascar Pochard in breeding plumage has dark brown plumage. On the underparts, the breast is dark brown, flanks and vent are reddish-brown and belly and undertail-coverts are white. Head and neck are brown with dark purplish wash. The female is duller overall, but both sexes have white wingbar contrasting with the black tips of the flight-feathers. The male in eclipse resembles female. The bill is dark grey with black nail. The eyes are white (dark brown in female). Legs and webbed feet are grey. The juvenile resembles adult but it is duller overall. The young male has pale grey eyes, becoming white during the first year. The Madagascar Pochard was discovered in 2006 in the restricted area of Banemavka in NW Madagascar. The last record from the historical site Lake Alaotra (300 km to S) was in 1991. It is presumed to have once occurred throughout C Plateau from which the species disappeared after human colonisation and wetland degradation.

### HABITAT

The Madagascar Pochard frequents freshwater lakes, pools and swamps. It needs areas of open water and islets of vegetation. This type of habitat was that of Lake Alaotra, but the rediscovery site, Lake Matsaborimena, is a deep volcanic lake and lacks emergent vegetation and fish. The Madagascar Pochard is usually silent outside the breeding season. But during the displays, the male gives high, wheezy whirr and also higher whistles while throwing

the head backwards. The female utters soft, clucking "gek gek" and rasping "gak-gak-gak".

### REPRODUCTION OF THIS SPECIES

The breeding season occurs between July and January. The Madagascar Pochard builds the nest in tuft of vegetation on bank, usually 10-20 cm above water level. It is made with pieces of marsh vegetation and lined with down feathers.

The female lays 6-10 buff-white eggs, and incubates alone during 26- 28 days in captivity. The chicks are dark brown above and yellowish on face and underparts. The fledging success is very low with duckling mortality due to starvation, especially when 2-3 weeks old. This is probably due to lack of adequate food.

### THREATS AND DECLINE

Based on the accounts written by Webb and Delacour's in the 1920s and 1930s it seemed that the bird was still relatively common at Lake Alaotra (these accounts also give an idea just how much the Lake Alaotra region has changed).

This bird probably started to decline dramatically sometime in the late 1940s or early 1950s and the cause of decline was the introduction of numerous fish species in the lake, they killed most of the pochard chicks; nesting sites as well as adult birds are also likely to have become victims of introduced fishes. Rice cultivation, cattle grazing on the shores, burning of shore vegetation, introduced mammals (rats), gill-net fishing and hunting are all factors that made this duck vanish completely from the lake. The last record of multiple birds at Lake Alaotra is from 9 June 1960 when a small flock of about 20 birds was spotted on the lake. Despite the rarity of the species in 1960, a male was shot, and the specimen is now held by the Zoological Museum Amsterdam. There is a very dubious report of a sighting made outside Antananarivo in 1970.

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