

# Paradise Shelduck: noise from New Zealand

(*Tadorna variegata*)

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Photo by Jerry Jennings



Paradise Shelducks at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens, the female in the lead. Her head is lowered in an aggressive display.

Incoming shipments are always exciting, especially when species are new to one's collection. It was, therefore, with great anticipation that I approached a jumble of various size shipping boxes heaped in a corner of an air-cargo terminal — a long-awaited collection from Sylvan Heights Waterfowl in North Carolina, America's largest assemblage of duck, goose and swan species. As if they were Christmas presents, I wondered which box held Green-winged Teal, and which one had Rosy-billed Pochards, when a loud and discordant "Onngk!" from the biggest box ceased any speculation as to its content. On April 2, 1991, Paradise Shelducks arrived at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens.

Of the 23 species of waterfowl maintained here in Fallbrook, Paradise Shelducks are certainly the most vocal — a trait that has not been overlooked. The Maori of its native New Zealand call this bird "Putangi" —

the "Wail of Death" (Johnsgard, 1978). No less a person than Jean Delacour dismissed their noise as "positively tiresome" (Todd, 1979).

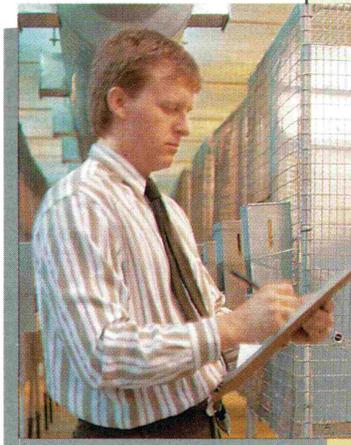
On the other hand, I find their calls charming, divided as they are, between the sexes. While the darkly somber male stomps around, his head held low, his guttural "Onggka-ongka-ongka!" punctuated with tenor "Gawoo's," the rich chestnut female, her white head tipped up, maintains a steady high pitched commentary of "Kek-kek-kekek-keh-keh-kek-keh-keh..." as she accompanies him on patrol. "Patrol" is used advisedly as, except during the post-breeding molt, the normal social unit is one highly territorial pair (Johnsgard, 1978; Todd, 1979), fiercely guarding an area not only against others of their species, but other sorts of birds as well.

At Emerald Forest, our pair monopolizes the island in the lake, often being the only birds present on it.

Early in the morning and late in the afternoon, they are usually back in a wooded area near the fence which encloses an acre of lake and forest. Our other waterfowl give them a wide berth. Occasionally, one will be seen threatening another bird with lowered head. Never, however, have I seen any physical contact between them and any other species, including our male wild Muscovy and the pair of Cuban Tree Ducks, both notoriously aggressive, and the only birds in our collection that have displayed an aggression towards the Paradise Shelducks. I find it interesting that I have observed no interaction at all with our pair of Common Shelducks (*Tadorna tadorna*), the only other member of this seven species genus presently kept here.

Paradise Shelducks have been traditionally considered an aggressive species in mixed collections, to be combined with care (Rutgers & Norris, 1970; Todd, 1979). I was, therefore, most surprised to find the German aviculturist Hartmut Kolbe (1979) asserting that they are "Good tempered" and "even breeding birds are not aggressive toward other ducks." As he further states, another reason that the Paradise Shelduck is the "most suitable" Shelduck for private aviculture is that it "does not disturb with noisy, obtrusive calls," one wonders if he is indeed talking about the same species that Frank Todd (1979) states is "among the fiercest and most pugnacious of the Shelducks." As Kolbe gives a very detailed species account of this bird, I'm inclined to believe that these remarkable discrepancies may be accounted for by a mutation arising out of the very likely highly inbred European population.

Although the Paradise Shelduck is not a rare bird in New Zealand (Johnsgard, 1978; Todd, 1979), total exports, in common with other New Zealand wildlife, have been small in number and it has traditionally been considered a collector's item, standing out in zoos and private collections. This species was first bred in England in 1865, and shortly afterwards in France (Rutgers & Norris, 1970). The first U.S. breeding took place in the New Jersey collection of T.A. Havemayer, sometime between 1917 and 1926 (Crandall, 1927). It apparently was not bred in America again until 1957, when one hatched at the San Diego Zoo from a



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pair that arrived from the Auckland Zoo in 1951. Long time zoo historian, Marvin Jones, San Diego's registrar, informed me that only one duckling was produced, the only offspring of that pair, which arrived with four other birds, two of which were sent to the Brookfield Zoo. K.C. Lint, San Diego's Curator of Birds for more than 30 years, told me he designed a "real special nest" to induce these birds to breed — a six foot long tunnel-like structure of wood, set in a large hillside. The parents hatched the egg themselves, after 28 days.

I learned from Marvin Jones that the San Diego Zoo made several further importations of Paradise Shelducks; from Wellington, New Zealand and Sydney and Melbourne, in Australia. K.C. Lint brought back a pair from Sydney in 1958, with a large shipment of Australian animals, and recalls that it was necessary, during the boat trip across the warm Pacific, to dump several buckets of water on the Shelducks each day to keep these New Zealand natives cool.

A bird that came to San Diego from Wellington on February 4, 1966 was sent to Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo on March 10, 1983 where, I am told by Wendy Wienker, Woodland Park's registrar, it died May 2, 1986. Though it is not certain, this bird was thought to have hatched in 1964. Marvin Jones is not aware of a comparable longevity, which is fairly impressive for waterfowl in general.

During the period 1959 to 1963, the International Zoo Yearbook lists only three institutions where Paradise Shelducks were bred: Wellington, in 1961 and 1962; the Parc Zoologique de Paris in 1963; and the encyclopedic waterfowl collection at Slimbridge, England in 1963 (Zoological Society of London, 1961-1964). For 1970, the IZY lists one American Zoo, St. Louis; as well as two British collections; West Berlin; Delacour's collection at Cleres; Parc Zoologique in Paris; Rotterdam; and Sydney (Zoological Society of London, 1972). The most recent volume, covering 1987, catalogues eleven collections. Surprisingly, five of these are in Eastern and Central Europe: Jihlava (Czechoslovakia), Rostock (formerly in East Germany), Poznan (Poland), Kharkov (U.S.S.R.) and Moscow. Otherwise, hatchings took place in Otorohanga (New Zealand), Perth (Australia), Rotterdam, the Bird Park

Avifauna at Alphen (the Netherlands), the Los Angeles Zoo, and Sea World San Diego. The ducklings at the two U.S. locations did not survive (Zoological Society of London 1991).

Frank Todd (1979) states that the average clutch size of the Paradise Shelduck is eight eggs. Of the above-mentioned collections hatching this species in 1987, only one exceeded this number; Perth, where nine were hatched. Otherwise, five hatched at Jihlava; four were hatched at Los Angeles, Moscow, and Rotterdam; two at Alphen and Poznan; and one at Kharkov, Otorohanga, Rostock, and SeaWorld, San Diego. As with the previously noted possible behavior changes, inbreeding may be a factor.

Be that as it may, Paradise Shelducks are available to private aviculturists from American breeders. Though certainly expensive compared to many other domestically reared waterfowl, a pair may be purchased for about the same price as a quarantine station Umbrella Cockatoo or a wholesale domestic baby Jenday Conure.

Brimming with personality, a pair of this hardy species will do well in a backyard. K.C. Lint suggests that, by themselves, they are rather quiet. The distinctive sexual dichromatism, where the female, rather than being drab, sports a colorful plumage that may be considered more attractive than the male's elegant severity, is unique. And, of course, one has the rare opportunity of maintaining a member of the marvelous and peculiar New Zealand avifauna which, aside from the Yellow- and Red-fronted Kakarikis, the New Zealand Shoveler and Scaup and, only rarely, the Kea, is not otherwise available to American aviculture.

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\*I am grateful to Steven P. Johnson, Librarian of the New York Zoological Society, for providing the proper citation for this largely forgotten, but important, reference. ●