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The Common Shelduck

a sea duck for the back yard

(*Tadorna tadorna*)

by Josef H. Lindholm, III, Lead Aviculturist
Emerald Forest Bird Gardens
Fallbrook, California

Of the world's waterfowl, those species living in northern oceans capture the imagination with their bold or unusual colors and patterns, interesting shapes, and specialized natural histories. For the most part, however, maritime ducks and geese have traditionally been avicultural subjects only for the advanced collector. Eiders, Scoters, Harlequins, and the Oldsquaw or Long-tailed Duck require specialized diets and care, and are mostly very difficult to come by. Brant Geese, Canvasbacks, Goldeneyes, and Buffle-head accept more routine conditions and are commercially available but are, in most cases, costly. There is one duck of the northern seas, readily available and easy to manage, a bird of magnificent appearance; the Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*).

The Common Shelduck, also known as the European or Northern Shelduck, breeds only along coastlines, inland seas or salt lakes (Delacour 1954, Johnsgard 1978), with only some migrating populations occurring in freshwater. Along the coast of Europe, the breeding range extends from France to Norway, including the southern Baltic shore, east to Estonia (Johnsgard 1978). The Mediterranean breeding range is restricted to Spain, the famous Camargue of France, Sardinia, Tunisia and the Balkan Coast (Delacour, 1954, Johnsgard 1978). Common Shelducks also breed on the northern shore of the Black Sea, and a separate Asian population nests around the Caspian Sea and the salt lakes of Central Asia, east to North China and Tibet (Delacour 1954). The northern European population is basically resident year around — migration occurs in July, just before the molt. Ninety percent of these western birds molt at Great Knechtsand, in Heligoland Bight, off Germany (Johnsgard 1978, Kolbe 1979). The North Sea birds do

not usually go south for the winter. The continental population winter on North Sea mud flats. Only "periods of severe frost" send them to Britain, or occasionally south to Portugal (Kolbe 1979). British birds molting in Heligoland return to the British Isles and winter there (Delacour 1954). Mediterranean birds do winter in north Africa and Egypt, while the Asian population migrates to northern India, Northern Vietnam, Myanmar, China, and Japan (Delacour 1954).

The primary food of the Common Shelduck is mollusks. The northern European and British birds subsist largely on the mud flat snail *Hydrobia* (Johnsgard 1978). Fish, fish eggs, other invertebrates, and marine algae make up a smaller proportion of their diet. The preferred nest site is a rabbit burrow (Kolbe 1979). Nests may otherwise occupy other holes in the ground, hollow trees, or rarely between rocks or in heather. Breeding commences in the spring.

Jean Delacour (1954) writes that the Common Shelduck has "long been kept in captivity in Europe". How long may be gathered from a couple of illustrations in *A History of Domesticated Animals*, by Frederick Zuener (1963), Professor of Environmental Archaeology at the University of London. On page 471, a beautifully detailed Common Shelduck and Common Teal (*Anas c. crecca*) appear in a Roman mosaic in the collection of the National Museum at Naples. Although this pair is sitting on a table with shellfish and fish for dinner, they are obviously life studies. Professor Zuener mentions that the Romans kept wild ducks in enclosures called Nessotrophia. While the Naples mosaic is not dated, the delightful one from Pompeii, on page 405, was obviously created before that city was entombed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D.

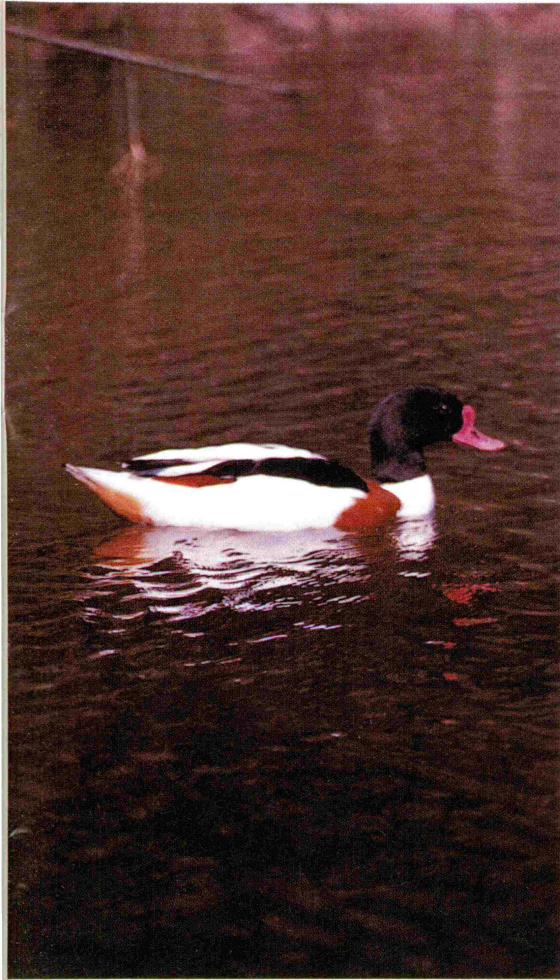
Photo by Leon Milne

time, was not afraid of being emphatic and is notorious for his 1915 pronouncement on gorillas; "there is not the slightest reason to hope that an adult gorilla, either male or female, ever will be seen living in a zoological park . . . It is unfortunate that the ape . . . never can be seen in adult state in zoological gardens; but we may as well accept that fact — because we cannot do otherwise" (Crandall 1964).

There seem to have been initial problems in establishing this species in the Eastern U.S. It does not appear among the 29 Anatids included in the list of birds bred in the U.S. through December 1930, compiled by Crandall (1932). It had, in fact, been bred by that time in San Mateo, California at the aviaries of J.V. deLaveaga. At the time of Mr. deLaveaga's death in 1931, his waterfowl collection was the second largest in the world, surpassed only by Jean Delacour's collection at Cleres. I have found no precise date of Mr deLaveaga's breeding of the Common Shelduck. Greenwall and Sturgeon (1988) note it took place by 1930, a date they also provide for deLaveaga's U.S. first breed-

ings of the Orinoco Goose, the Chinese Spot-billed Duck, the Southern Yellowbill, the Chestnut Teal, the Chilean Teal, the Chiloe Wigeon, the Tufted Duck and the American Golden-eye. (The deLaveaga U.S. first breedings of the Magpie Goose, the Javan and White-faced Tree Ducks, the Ashy-headed and Ruddy-headed Geese and the Ring-necked Duck, are noted to have occurred "by 1931"). Sadly deLaveaga's 87 species of waterfowl were dispersed after 1932, following an unsuccessful attempt to establish the "Whittier Ornithological Academy" in southern California (Patrick, 1932, Corsan 1932).

Jean Delacour (1954) wrote that this bird is "perfectly hardy if provided with a large range of land and water, where they can find plenty of worms, insects, crustaceans, water plants and other natural food" or "a rich mash, or dog biscuit." With proper nutritional precautions, the Common Shelduck has become well established in international aviculture. The usually meticulous *International Zoo Yearbook* in its most recent listings, for 1987, mentions only that 325 were hatched that year,



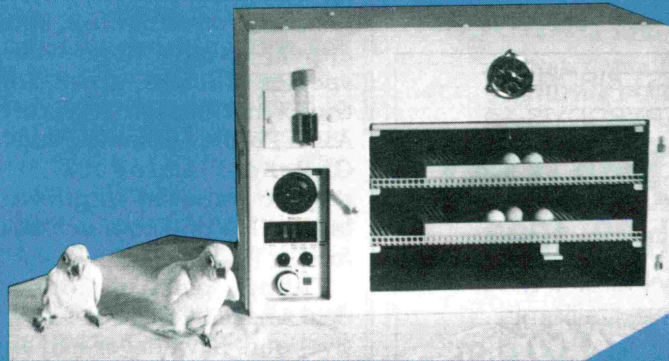
Male Common Shelduck at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens.

This mosaic depicts a stylized, cartoonlike, but quite identifiable Common Shelduck in the company of a similarly pictured Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), a Mallard and an Egyptian Goose. In the foreground, a mongoose faces off with a cobra, and a hippo confronts a crocodile — a jolly scene from mysterious Egypt!

When the New York Zoological Park, more often called the Bronx Zoo, opened its gates November 8, 1899, with ceremonies in front of the Aquatic Bird House (one of the few exhibits then completed), a flock of Common Shelducks inside that building were there to greet the Zoo's first visitors. On page 94 of William Bridge's (1974) history of the New York Zoological Society, at least 11 specimens can be discerned among the inhabitants of the central cage. It appears that these birds did not ultimately do well. William Temple Hornaday (1927), the Bronx Zoo's first director, wrote this "remarkably colored bird" was "unfortunately difficult to keep alive in this climate." Dr. Hornaday, the Marlin Perkins of his

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in 50 collections, with only 33 failing to survive (Zoological Society of London 1991).

On June 30, 1991, *ISIS* lists 23 U.S. member institutions holding Common Shelducks, with a total of 98 birds. The largest groups are at St. Louis Zoo, with 20 (15 hatched there in the previous year), the San Diego Wild Animal Park, with 14 (five hatched there) and the Fort Worth Zoo, with 13. (International Species Information System 1991).

On breeder's lists, Common Shelducks are usually priced somewhat higher than many other popular waterfowl — about three-times as much as Wood Ducks, and slightly more than twice the price of Mandarins, Red-crested and Rosey-billed Pochards and Ringed Teal. A pair of Common Shelducks can be obtained for about the same price as three hand-raised cockatiels from a breeder.

The pair at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens is a female that arrived in August of 1990 from Sea World of Texas, at San Antonio, and a male from America's largest waterfowl collection, Sylvan Heights Waterfowl II, in North Carolina arriving in April, 1991. Our one acre waterfowl lake and contiguous fenced woods admirably meet Jean Delacour's previously noted standards. The lake is surrounded by all sorts of naturally occurring vegetation, and pond snails were much in evidence until the addition of waterfowl. Bullfrogs, treefrogs, and Western Toads fill the pond with eggs, and eventual tadpoles, each season, and introductions of Mosquito Fish, Goldfish, Long-eared Sunfish, and Crayfish appear to have done well. The 23 species of ducks, geese, and swans, the White-breasted Waterhen, the Asian Purple Gallinules, and the three Chilean Flamingoes otherwise receive standard all-purpose gamebird pellets and commercial flamingo feed.

Though pairs of Common Shelducks have been known to be aggressive, ours have never had any hostile interaction with other birds, even the notoriously aggressive Paradise Shelducks, Cuban Tree Ducks and wild Moscovy Ducks. Since the arrival of the male, the pair is usually together. Our female, typically noticeably smaller than the male, lacks any of the white facial marks females often have. She does have a definitely smaller head, in proportion to her body, and of course, lacks the

beak-knob, so distinctive in the non-molting male. In July, both went through their molt, retaining the elegant pattern of greenish-black, chestnut, white and metallic green common to both sexes, but in a decidedly scruffier version. The beautiful red beaks faded in intensity and, as noted above, the male's red knob, reminiscent of a Mute Swan's or Rosey-billed Pochard's, substantially declined. As I write, in very early October, both birds are again brilliant, and the male is constantly serenading his mate with surprisingly sweet, short, descending whistles.

In marked contrast to the often complicated, gaudy patterns of other popular ornamental waterfowl, the beautifully simple pattern of the Common Shelduck does have a decidedly maritime effect, calling to mind the clean lines of a ship. Jean Delacour (1954) called this bird "a great ornament to any pond and garden." With a good protein source, such as soaked dogfood, they are easily maintained in small quarters. We are fortunate that this stately bird from northern shores is established in aviculture.

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