

The American Green-winged Teal: an overlooked avicultural ornament

(*Anas crecca carolinensis*)

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Even if one follows the novel arrangement of University of Kansas Ornithologist Bradley Livezey (1991) and removes from the genus *Anas* the three wigeons, the Gadwall, and the Falcated and Cape Teal, placing them all in the genus *Mareca*, *Anas*, with its nearly 40 species of Mallards, shovelers, Pintails, and teal, remains an enormous genus, by far the largest in the waterfowl order.

Anas is a genus of enormously wide distribution, richly represented on every continent, with members scattered on remote islands, and well-adapted subspecies fringing both Poles. Several species themselves have great ranges, in particular those that breed throughout North America, Europe, and Northern Asia, the vast area collectively designated the Holarctic Realm by zoogeographers.

The Holarctic members of the genus *Anas* are among the most familiar birds to the American public, being highly prized by hunters, and

welcome visitors to city parks and other public waters especially during migration. Though the Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), the ancestor of all Eurasian domestic ducks, has distinct subspecies in Greenland, Hawaii, Laysan Island, Mexico and the American southwest, the U.S. Gulf Coast and the Florida Peninsula, throughout the rest of its vast trans-hemispheric range it exhibits no significant variation. Likewise, aside from its two dull-plumaged subspecies in the Sub-Antarctic Kerguelen and Crozet islands, the Northern Pintail (*A. acuta*) is recognized by taxonomists as the same bird in California's Central Valley, the Nile delta, the French Camargue, and Lake Baikal. Indeed, Pintails have crossed both the Atlantic and Pacific in their annual migration, regularly migrating "also far to the East and to the West" (Kolbe, 1979). The Northern Shoveler (*A. clypeata*) has no subspecies at all.

In contrast, the Green-winged Teal of Continental North America, (*Anas crecca carolinensis*), is immediately distinguished from its Eurasian counterpart (*A. c. crecca*), by the male's possession of a striking white bar, in front of, and at a right angle to, the bend of the wing. This is totally lacking in Old World birds, who instead are distinguished by a horizontal white stripe running the length of the folded wing, and a very fine but distinct white line between the beautiful green and chestnut fields on the head. *A. c. crecca* is also slightly smaller, averaging about 7% less in mass than *A. crecca carolinensis* (Todd, 1979). Somewhat intermediate in size, though sometimes heavier than mainland-American birds (Todd, 1979), are the non-migratory Green-winged Teal of the Aleutian Islands, (*Anas crecca nimia*), otherwise almost identical to the Eurasian subspecies, from which they are obviously derived. Every year, American birdwatchers spot several Eurasian Green-winged Teal along America's North Atlantic coast, and they have been reported occasionally from the

Pacific coast and the interior as well (Terres, 1980). I am not aware of any of these "accidentals" breeding in North America. The drably speckled females of all three subspecies are almost identical (Todd, 1979).

At an average mass of 350 g (Todd, 1979), the American Green-winged Teal is the smallest of all U.S. ducks, with the above-noted possible exception of the Aleutian subspecies. Collectively, *Anas crecca* is the smallest Anatid north of the Equator.

In the breeding season, American Green-winged Teal nest practically everywhere in western and central North America, from north-central Alaska to southern California and New Mexico (Todd, 1979; Terres, 1980). Traditionally, the Atlantic Coast breeding range was largely confined to Canada, with only occasional nestings in New England (Terres, 1980). Since the 1970s, the Atlantic breeding range has been extending south, the first Maryland nest being discovered in 1971 (Terres, 1980).

Migration in North America is somewhat variable. During mild winters, birds may not go south at all, even in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland (Terres, 1980). Alaskan birds appear to winter as far north as British Columbia, while other populations winter throughout the continental U.S. and Mexico. Although they may occasionally reach Colombia (Davis, 1972), the vast majority of American green-wings remain on the continent, very few wintering in the Caribbean or south of Mexico (Todd, 1979; Terres, 1980).

Migrating in large flocks, they have traditionally been popular with hunters and large numbers are shot each season (Todd, 1979). The population appears to be stable, with recent breeding range expansion, as noted above, and may exceed three million (Todd, 1979).

Such a beautiful and abundant bird naturally attracts the attention of aviculturists, yet, in practice, the American Green-winged Teal is not a comparatively commonplace duck in public or private collections, and, where present, is usually not the center of attention.

Anas crecca as a species is notorious for the nervousness and shyness

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Male American Green-winged Teal at Emerald Forest Bird Gardens.

of wild-caught specimens; Delacour (1956) thought it "a beautiful little duck, but usually remaining very shy when captured adult . . . Its timid temperament is a real drawback . . . Those reared in captivity are usually tame, but they are not easily obtainable, as these teal have little value and breed rather seldom in confinement." Captain Delacour did find that the American Green-winged Teal "proves tamer than the European and nests more readily . . . It is just as pretty as the other subspecies and, being less shy, it is a better bird in confinement."

Frank Todd (1979), who while Corporate Curator of Birds for Sea World Inc., built the then-largest collection of Anatids in North America, guardedly concurred that "the American birds appear to be slightly less nervous than their Old World counterpart and, as a result, are apt to breed more readily," but, on the whole, found them "secretive" in captivity.

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least expensive species, a pair costing less than a retail Gouldian Finch, or about the same as the far more easily bred Ringed Teal (*Callonetta leucophrys*). (*Anas c. crecca* usually costs about twice as much in the U.S., still a fairly inexpensive bird.) The first breeding record for *A.c. carolinensis* appears to be that of J.A. Cox, of East Brewster, Mass., listed, without date, by Beebe & Crandall (1909).

It does appear that the atmosphere of most public exhibits is not conducive to the breeding of American Green-winged Teal. None of the 21 U.S. and Canadian public institutions listed as holding this duck, in the June 30, 1991 publication of the International Species Inventory System, bred it in the previous twelve months. Nine of these collections held only single specimens or birds of the same sex. Groups of more than five were at Albuquerque, which held four males and two females; Baltimore, with three pairs; Detroit, with five males and three females; St. Paul, with five pairs; and San Antonio, with four males and three females. Together, these 21 institutions held 40 males and 30 females. Of these 70 birds, 80% were known to be captive-bred, while 7% were identified as wild-caught.

Of the 22 species of ducks, geese and swans on the one-acre lake and adjoining woods at Jerry Jennings' Emerald Forest Bird Gardens at Fallbrook, California, the pair of American Green-winged Teal are the least likely to be seen by casual observers. Bred at Sylvan Heights Waterfowl II, Mike Lubbock's collection at Scotland Neck, North Carolina, and America's largest current assemblage of Anatid species, they arrived at Fallbrook April 2, 1991. They keep to themselves, hardly ever joining the mixed flocks of Pochards, Ringed Teal, Tree Ducks, Wood Ducks, Mandarins, and other species, and are more likely than other birds to be found in dense vegetation. They are not wild or skittish, however, rather quiet and aloof. Aside from one frightening attack on the male by the pair of notoriously aggressive Cuban Tree Ducks immediately after the Greenwings were introduced to the enclosure, I have never seen them bullied by any other birds, despite the fact that the two pairs of Ringed Teal are the only smaller species present.

William Temple Hornaday, the first

Director of the New York Zoological Park from 1896 to 1926, broadly divided zoo animals into two categories. "Good Animals" lived long and prospered (and occasionally bred). "Bad Animals" did not — a failing Hornaday attributed to that species' inherent stupidity and stubbornness. He summed up his 30 years of Bronx Zoo observations in the 1927 edition of the Zoo's Guidebook (he wrote all the previous ones as well). Dr. Hornaday (1927) noted, "The Green-winged Teal (*Nettion carolinensis*) . . . are very delicate birds, and therefore rather difficult to maintain in captivity. A flock . . . will be found in the Flying Cage." I imagine the teal in this enormous aviary, still in use for Patagonian Seabirds, were full-winged. Frank Todd (1979) notes that this species perches "from time to time on the low limbs of dead trees." The German aviculturist Hartmut Kolbe (1979) recommends captive bred Eurasian and American Green-winged Teal as "equally suitable for accommodation in aviaries, small enclosures and on communal ponds" and further considers them "undemanding and very suitable for waterfowl enthusiasts with little experience and limited space." Wild specimens are apt to visit collections of captive waterfowl. Brad Hazelton, my fellow Attendant II at Fort Worth Zoo's Bird Department, told me a pair appeared at one of the Zoo's beautifully landscaped ponds in early December, 1991. There are no captive green-wings currently at Fort Worth, but there is an extensive collection of other teal. The wonderful assemblage of visiting migratory waterfowl that I saw in the entrance lake at the city Zoo at Phoenix, Arizona, November 30, 1991, was dominated by American wigeons, Mallards, and Pintails. Smaller numbers of Gadwalls, Northern Shovelers, and green-wings were very much in evidence, as well. The Green-winged Teal seemed to form small flocks of their own species in the midst of all the other ducks.

It would seem that Green-winged Teal are especially appropriate as free-flighted aviary birds. At the same time, a captive-bred pair in a small pond are apt to become quite tame (Kolbe, 1979). They do well on a basic waterfowl diet, and are quite weather-hardy. Some may consider it a drawback that, in common with most Northern Hemisphere ducks, the male undergoes an early fall

eclipse plumage, closely resembling the comparatively drab and patternless female. The transition is sudden and profound — the Emerald Forest Bird Gardens' male was reported missing, so it had to be explained that the other small greyish-brown bird was one and the same as the splendid drake noted days before. This period was quite brief, though, and the male was shortly back to its former brilliance after another surprisingly brief molt. I personally consider eclipse plumages to be very much part of the fun in waterfowl keeping, much like the yearly anticipation of Tulips and Daffodils from their dormant bulbs. One other reservation the private aviculturist may have is the requirement of a permit to sell captive-bred U.S. native waterfowl. One does not need a permit to possess or purchase captive-bred specimens, however, and the procurement of a permit does not appear to be especially difficult, to judge from the number of breeders advertising native species in the journals or newsletters of gamebird organizations and clubs.

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