

THE SHOVELLER.

(*Spatula rhynchotis*.)

MAORI NAME: KURUWHENGI.

(By R. A. Falla.)

In a country so well watered as New Zealand originally was, birds of the duck family are bound to form an important and conspicuous element of the wild life haunting lakes, ponds and rivers. Our native ducks, indeed, are of such vigorous stock that the grey duck, the most plentiful of them, is still regarded as a game bird and may still be shot within legal limits as to season and number of birds per day. Ten or twelve years ago there were five other species of ducks on the list of native game, but gradually it has been found necessary to remove them one by one to the schedule of Absolutely Protected Birds, until at the present time the only native duck other than the Grey Duck remaining on the open list in all shooting districts is the Shoveller, or Spoonbill, as it is more generally called by sportsmen.

The Shoveller still survives in fair numbers because of its scattered distribution and more solitary habits. It was never a very common bird, and even to-day is not often shot because its habits keep it away from the areas where grey duck congregate and, therefore, where shooters are more numerous. It is possible also that the careful nesting habits of the Shoveller help it in the somewhat unequal struggle for survival.

The duck is a close sitter and her nest is often to be found in unexpectedly exposed situations. The site may be near water, but not necessarily in a damp place. A small tuft or clump of grass slightly higher than the surrounding vegetation affords sufficient cover, for the duck sits low and close and thus escapes detection. She commences to sit when her full set of ten or twelve eggs has been laid and leaves them cautiously only for short intervals of feeding. The eggs are of small size and the nest is thickly lined with down. The drake takes no direct part in the care of eggs or young, but during the incubation period he remains in attendance a short distance away, usually on water. He will accompany the duck to a more distant feeding ground and return with her to the neighbourhood of the nest, flying

fast and high. The birds part company suddenly in the air, when he returns to his waiting ground and she to her nest.

On the wing the adult drake can be distinguished by his conspicuous markings, especially the white of face and thigh, and both sexes are distinguishable by their large heads and long beaks, contrasted with very thin neck and rather small body. The distinctive features of the bill are to be seen in ducklings newly hatched, and by the time the Shoveller is full grown a wonderfully sensitive straining mechanism has been developed. When these birds feed they do so by scooping up floating organisms on the surface or sifting mud and sand in shallow water. The beak tissue is well supplied with nerves and the bird is much aided in its search for food by a sense of touch.

When the nesting season is over, the old birds moult and the plumage of the drake becomes more like that of the duck. This "eclipse" condition is of short duration, and the new bright feathers begin to appear again in a further moult in the autumn. At this time Shovellers frequent the larger lakes and are not uncommon in small parties, but are seldom seen in large flocks. They do not appear to go to the sea-coast as frequently as some other ducks do, but may be occasionally seen on estuaries. They are comparatively quiet both in voice and disposition, and become tame so readily with a little encouragement that it is to be hoped that this highly ornamental and useful duck will in the near future be removed from the open game list, for it provides at present very little addition to sport, and that it may become much better known on waterways and sanctuaries where native ducks are encouraged and available for people to see.

"If birds be capable of happiness in a cage, such happiness or contentment is but a poor, pale emotion compared with the wild exuberant gladness they have in freedom, where all their instincts have full play, and where the perils that surround them do but brighten their many splendid faculties."

—W. H. Hudson.