

and untamed rivers



Charlie Douglas, the famous surveyor of South Westland, noted that "... its prevailing characteristic is stupidity to an amazing degree. This combined with what appears to be a fatal thirst for admiration is its ruin, and make it an easy prey to dogs and men, and nothing but the inaccessible places it frequents saves it from being exterminated." Blue ducks were a staple food of back country explorers such as Barrington who, on his epic exploration of the Red Hills in West Otago, ate blue ducks to help survive the rigours of this remote and unforgiving country.

Early oral records show that blue ducks were widespread and abundant. Sadly, that is not the case today. Most birds are now confined to unmodified mountain rivers in the central North Island and western South Island. River diversions and hydro dams for irrigation or power generation have turned clear rushing waters into slow turbid streams, as in the headwaters of the Whanganui River. Forest removal and agricultural development have led to siltation of clean rivers and the loss of necessary riparian (streamside) vegetation. Populations of introduced trout compete with blue duck for in-stream invertebrate food sources. Introduced predators threaten accessible populations of the blue duck, whose ground nesting habits make it especially vulnerable. Its only natural predators were other birds such as the black-backed gull and maybe the native falcon or now extinct birds of prey.

Concern has been mounting in recent years over the apparent contraction of blue

Above: Blue duck rest on riverside boulders during the day, but keep a watchful eye up and down the river. Photo: Alan Reith/Arthur's Pass National Park Collection

Left: Found only in New Zealand's back country rivers and streams, the blue duck is one of only a few birds in the world adapted to fast water habitat. Photo: Alan Reith

plays and is territorial – unusual features for a duck. Most revealing, however, are the distinctive proteins that make up its feathers. These are an important indication of its genetic uniqueness and ancient origins.

Species in decline

When Forster, a naturalist on Cook's Endeavour, first described the blue duck, it was present throughout the mountains of the New Zealand mainland. It appears to

have been common in all forested river catchments, particularly in steep high altitude areas, and occasionally right to the coast as observed in Fiordland. Well known to the Maori, it was an important source of food on inland expeditions. They named it *whio* after the distinctive whistling call of the male bird. For the early European explorers it was a charming and friendly source of companionship and amusement. So tame in fact that it often ended up in the billy for the evening meal.

duck distribution. Trampers and hunters noted its disappearance from favoured back country haunts such as the Tararua Ranges. Sightings of birds, and systematic surveys of rivers, in the Arthur's Pass area show that blue ducks have disappeared from several river tributaries over the last 20 years. But detailed monitoring of small populations has so far failed to provide a conclusive answer to one of the mysteries of blue duck populations – where do all the young birds disperse?

Most years there is a surplus of fledglings, but very few manage to either