

Aquatic birds with a small rounded head, short flattened bill, rounded body, short legs, webbed feet and a waddling gait on land. They fly strongly with neck outstretched. Sexes alike in swans and geese, but male ducks are usually more colourful than females. Lay large clutches. Chicks leave the nest within days but are guarded for several months until they can fly.

**GRASS (Plumed) WHISTLING DUCK** *Dendrocygna eytoni* Rare Australian vagrant

50 cm, 800 g. Pale brown duck with goose-like profile and stiff cream plumes curving up from the flanks to above back. Bill flecked pink and grey. Sexes alike. Juvenile paler with small plumes. In flight, head held below the horizontal, back hunched and legs trailing. When flying, constantly twittering and whistling; the wings also whistle. **Habitat:** Grassland near wetlands. [Sp 120]



**WATERFOWL**

Anatidae

Swans, geese and ducks are found worldwide in freshwater and marine habitats. There are about 160 species, of which 14 (4 endemic, 4 native and 6 introduced) breed or have bred in the wild in the New Zealand region since 1920. A further endemic species (*Mergus australis*) became extinct in the early years of the 1900s, and another 6 species are vagrants to the region.

All species have webbed feet for swimming in freshwater rivers and lakes, or in coastal waters. Their bill is modified for filter-feeding; water and food is sucked in at the tip of the bill and expelled through fine comb-like lamellae at the sides, which catch minute seeds and invertebrates. Although most feed in this way, some species mainly graze on aquatic or terrestrial vegetation and pick seeds (e.g. peas or wheat) off the ground, and the mergansers have serrated bills for catching fish.

In New Zealand, most introduced and some native species of waterfowl are legally harvested during a strictly controlled shooting season. Each year, Fish and Game Councils determine the length and timing of the season and the allowable bag for each species, and monitor the licensing of hunters and annual hunting statistics. A voluntary organisation, Ducks Unlimited, works to create and protect wetland habitats suitable for waterfowl and is also involved in captive breeding programmes for some threatened and rare species.

**Reading** Frith, H.J. 1982. *Waterfowl in Australia*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson. Madge, S. & Burn, H. 1988. *Wildfowl: An Identification Guide to the Ducks, Geese and Swans of the World*. London: Christopher Helm. Johnsgard, P.A. 1978. *Ducks, Geese and Swans of the World*. Lincoln: Univ Nebraska Press. Williams, M. 1981. *The Duckshooter's Bag*. Wellington: Wetland Press.

**120. GRASS WHISTLING DUCK** *Dendrocygna eytoni* Plate 30

**Other name:** Plumed Whistling Duck  
**Size:** 50 cm, 800 g  
**Distribution:** Breed in eastern and tropical Australia. They have recently expanded their breeding range south of 30°S into the Murray-Darling Basin. Partly nomadic, following rains and floods in wet years to colonise temporary wetlands and then returning to permanent water, mainly along the eastern seaboard. Vagrant to other parts of Australia, including Tasmania, and to New Guinea and New Zealand. Five records from New Zealand: Thames (May 1871), up to 14 (three shot) near

Balclutha (June 1871), three at Ashburton (1894–96), a flock of 12 near Karamea (January 1975), and a flock of 9–11 in the lower Waikato River area (April–May 1982). Despite flocks of birds appearing in New Zealand, they are not known to have bred.

**Feeding:** In Australia, they feed mainly on land near lagoon edges, in paddocks and on open plains. Their diet is almost entirely vegetation, especially grasses, grass seed-heads, legumes, herbs and sedges.

**Reading:** Ellis. B.A. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 244.