

LESSER SCAUP CHOKE ON PUFFER FISH

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Abstract.—On the morning of 16 Jan. 1985, 29 Lesser Scaup, (*Aythya affinis*), and a single Olivaceous Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax olivaceus*), were found dead on a small coastal island at the mouth of the Intra-coastal Waterway/Arroyo Colorado River in Cameron County, Texas. The cause of death in each case appeared to be suffocation from attempted ingestion of Least Puffer Fish (*Sphoeroides parvus*).

MUERTES EN *AYTHYA AFFINIS* PROVOCADA POR SOFOCACIÓN AL INGERIRSE INDIVIDUOS DE *SPHOEROIDES PARVUS*

Resumen.—En la mañana del 16 de enero de 1985, 29 individuos de *Aythya affinis* y uno de *Phalacrocorax olivaceus* fueron encontrados muertos en una pequeña isla en la entrada del río Arroyo Colorado en el condado de Cameron, Texas. La causa de muerte en cada caso pareció ser sofocación al intentarse ingerir un pez inflador (*Sphoeroides parvus*).

In the early morning of 16 Jan. 1985, I encountered several dead ducks lying along the shore of a small island near the mouth of the Intra-coastal Waterway/Arroyo Colorado River near the Laguna Atascosa National



FIGURE 1. Three of 29 Lesser Scaup found dead from attempted ingestion of Least Puffer Fish.

Wildlife Refuge in Cameron County, Texas. As light conditions improved, I noticed more dead ducks along the shoreline. Close inspection showed that the ducks were Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) and each apparently had suffocated from attempted ingestion of a Least Puffer Fish (*Sphoeroides parvus*). I then walked the entire shoreline and found 29 dead Lesser Scaup and one dead Olivaceous Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax olivaceous*). Each had an inflated Least Puffer Fish lodged in its throat and its mandibles were agape (Fig. 1). I estimated that the birds had been dead for 3–5 d.

Although Least Puffer Fish are mildly poisonous (Hoese and Moore 1977), this may not have caused the birds' deaths. The Least Puffer Fish were inflated indicating that suffocation may have caused the birds' deaths.

I am unaware of how often such incidents occur, but there was a substantial dredging operation underway in the area and this may have stirred up or attracted invertebrates that attracted the Least Puffer Fish and, ultimately, the Lesser Scaup and Olivaceous Cormorant. The muddied waters from dredging may have prevented the birds from recognizing what they were pursuing. Regardless, it would be interesting to determine if Lesser Scaup and diving birds in general normally avoid feeding on Least Puffer Fish; my findings indicate that it would be adaptive to do so.

LITERATURE CITED

- HOESE, H. D., AND MOORE, R. H. 1977. The fishes of the Gulf Coast of Mexico. P. 267. Texas A&M University Press, College Station.

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