

FIRST RECORD OF THE COMMON POCHARD IN CALIFORNIA

MICHAEL A. PATTEN, P. O. Box 8561, Riverside, California 92515-8561

Robert Potvliege discovered a male Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) at Silver Lakes, San Bernardino County, California, on 11 February 1989. Silver Lakes, a small housing development with two man-made lakes and a golf course, is located adjacent to the town of Helendale, about 24 km north of Victorville. Following the report of the bird, the pochard was observed and photographed by others, including myself, through 17 February 1989.

As roughly one-third (22 of 69) of the Tufted Ducks (*A. fuligula*) recorded in California have returned for subsequent winters (Patten unpubl. data) and California's only Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) returned for three successive winters (Roberson 1986), observers made an effort to relocate the Common Pochard in following years. Much searching during the winter of 1989/90 failed to reveal it, but there are similar lakes nearby along the Mojave River that could support the bird. It returned to Silver Lakes during the winter of 1990/91, when it was discovered by Eugene A. Cardiff on 18 January and remained until 23 February, during which time it was photographed and observed by many. The bird returned again in the winter of 1991/92, when it was first observed and photographed by Curtis A. Marantz on 14 January and was seen sporadically through 8 February. During the winter of 1992/93, I located the bird on 26 November, after which it was observed until 29 November, but apparently not thereafter.

The following description is based on my field notes, on those of various observers who submitted documentation to the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC), and on photographs of the bird.

The pochard was an adult male. It was slightly smaller than a Redhead (*A. americana*) and substantially smaller than a Canvasback (*A. valisineria*), both of which were compared directly to the bird on various occasions. It tended to flock with either Redheads or American Coots (*Fulica americana*) but seemed to avoid the Canvasbacks. The head was deep rufous, lacking the black around the base of the bill shown by a male Canvasback. The irides were deep scarlet, closely matching a Canvasback's.

A gentle slope evident on the forehead was not nearly so dramatic as the slope of a Canvasback's forehead, particularly since the bill was "average" in proportions, rather than being comparatively large as on a Canvasback. A small bump near the base of the culmen gave the bill a slightly less smooth profile than a Canvasback's. The bill was black except for a distinct pale grayish blue saddle on the maxilla that lay closer to the tip than the base. The ends of the saddle curved back toward the head as they approached the tomia, so the saddle was not "cut off" straight at either end. The black nail was smaller than a Redhead's.

Like a male Canvasback or Redhead, the pochard had a jet black breast, tail, and upper- and under-tail coverts. The gray on the back and flanks was uniform, slightly darker than the grayish white of a male Canvasback but much paler than the medium gray of a male Redhead. Slightly darker gray vermiculation could be seen on the back and flank feathers at close range, again bringing to mind a Canvasback. The inner edges of the tertials were a darker gray than the back and flanks.

Its flight was powerful and direct, with rapid wingbeats. The flying pochard looked basically like a Canvasback, showing a mostly pale wing with only a hint of a paler

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stripe on the secondaries. The legs and feet were uniformly black and unbanded. No one could determine the presence or absence of the halluces, which are often removed on captive waterfowl (J. Morlan pers. comm.).

A color photograph of this bird, taken on 14 February 1989, was published in *American Birds* (43:230, 1989). The record (CBRC 30-1989), the first for California and North America outside of Alaska, was accepted by the CBRC (Patten 1991) and, with seven color photographs, is archived at the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Camarillo, Calif. The winter 1990/91 record (CBRC 7-1991) was accepted as the same individual by the CBRC. Records from the winters of 1991/92 (CBRC 106-1992) and 1992/93 (CBRC 287-1992) are currently under review.

DISTRIBUTIONAL SUMMARY

Common Pochards breed throughout the Palearctic, ranging from Iceland, the British Isles, southern Scandinavia, central Russia, and southern Siberia south through the Iberian Peninsula, central Europe, the Black and Caspian seas, Turkey, and Lake Baikal (AOU 1983). They winter through much of their breeding range and south to northern Africa, the Middle East, India, eastern China, Japan (AOU 1983), and, rarely, to the Azores, the Cape Verde and Canary islands, and the Philippines (Cramp and Simmons 1977). Small numbers are now apparently regular in winter in Hong Kong, where the species was formerly considered a vagrant (Chalmers 1986).

Cramp and Simmons (1977) considered the Common Pochard a vagrant on the Kamchatka Peninsula and Commander Islands, but the status there is likely the same as it is in the Aleutian Islands. This species appears regularly in the western Aleutians and fairly regularly on the Pribilofs (Kessel and Gibson 1978, J. L. Dunn pers. comm.). An adult male pochard observed at St. Lawrence Island on 1 June 1989 was found dead on the 6th (specimen to Univ. Alaska Museum); it provides the northernmost Alaska record of the species (D. D. Gibson pers. comm.). A female observed at Beluga Lake at Homer on 22 March 1981 is the only Common Pochard recorded on the Alaska mainland, and was also a month earlier than any other Alaska record (*Am. Birds* 35:853, 1981). I suspect that the Homer bird wintered in the New World, perhaps well south of Alaska.

Vagrant Common Pochards have reached Gambia and Tanzania (Brown et al. 1982), Thailand (Lekagul and Round 1991), and Guam (Maben and Wiles 1981). In addition, a female at Sand Island, Midway Atoll, Hawaii, from 22 November to 10 December 1979 was photographed (Grant and Pettit 1981, Pyle 1983). A pair reported on 11 June 1977 at Stonybeach Lake, Saskatchewan (Brazier 1978), has been considered hypothetical (Houston et al. 1981), although it is still cited in checklists by both the AOU (1983) and the ABA (1990).

As do many reports of vagrant waterfowl in California, this record engendered debate over the bird's natural occurrence. Todd (1979) indicated that the Common Pochard was "almost nonexistent in America" in waterfowl collections. Richard Ryan (in litt. to D. Roberson; now in CBRC

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files) opined that the “odds on an escape are rather slim” with regard to this record. Simon Tarsnane, a waterfowl aviculturist from California, indicated (in litt.) that the species is exceedingly scarce in captivity in North America, and because of the close similarity between Common Pochards, Canvasbacks, and Redheads, there is little demand to keep Common Pochards in this country. Tarsnane knew of only two collections recently holding any; one (Sea World in San Diego) no longer has any in its care, and the other (in North Carolina) apparently has only a “couple of pairs.” Acceptance of this record by the CBRC reflects the belief that there is a much higher probability of natural occurrence than of captive origin.

IDENTIFICATION SUMMARY

The Common Pochard is closely related to the Canvasback and the Redhead, the first two sometimes being treated as a superspecies (AOU 1983). All three species show the same general color scheme and plumage pattern (rusty head, black breast and hindquarters, and gray back and flanks). Differences in shape and size, back and flank color, iris color, and, especially, bill pattern make males in non-eclipse plumage a straightforward identification that is well-covered in standard field guides and Madge and Burn (1988). Males in eclipse plumage are duller, but iris color (yellow in the Redhead, scarlet in the Common Pochard and Canvasback) easily sexes them, as females of all three species have dark eyes. Distinctive bill patterns are still evident on eclipse males, with the Canvasback having a massive all-

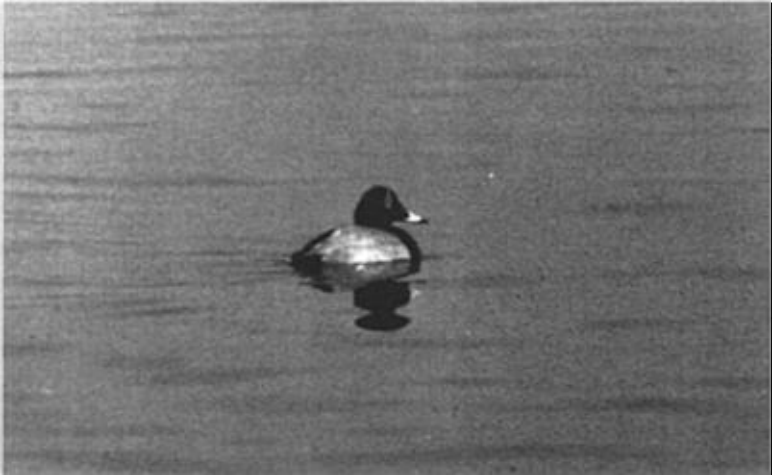


Figure 1. An adult male Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*), California's first, at Silver Lakes, San Bernardino County, 12 February 1991. Note the bill pattern and head shape.

Photo by Ed Greaves

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black bill, the Common Pochard having a black bill with a grayish blue saddle, and the Redhead having a grayish blue bill with a black "dipped-ink" tip and a whitish subterminal band.

Females are more problematic. All three species have a rather tawny brown head, a darker brown breast, and grayish brown on the back and flanks. As with males, the Redhead is the darkest, the Canvasback is the palest. The Common Pochard is intermediate in coloration, though closer to the Canvasback. The sloping forehead and massive all-black bill of a female Canvasback are typically striking. This species is also substantially larger and paler on the back and flanks than the other two. The Redhead shows a distinctly rounded head, a steep forehead, and a bill typically "duck-like" in proportions. The female's bill tends to be darker gray than the male's, but the same pattern is generally evident. In shape as in plumage, the female Common Pochard is intermediate between the Canvasback and Redhead. The forehead slopes into the bill, although not nearly so dramatically as it does on Canvasback. Bill proportions are more like those of the Redhead. The black bill often shows an obscure grayish saddle, which can be difficult to see. In late summer and fall, female Common Pochards may have an "all blackish bill" (Madge 1991), making assessment of head shape, body size (the Common Pochard is slightly smaller than the Redhead), and plumage critical to identification.

Complicating identification of these three species is the high incidence of hybrids in *Aythya* (Gillham et al. 1966, Madge and Burn 1988, Harris et al. 1989). Practically every conceivable hybrid combination within the genus has been recorded in the wild, and several hybrids have been identified as or closely resemble pure individuals of a different species. For example, a Tufted Duck \times Common Pochard resembling a male Redhead was found in Britain (Kemp 1991), a male Common Pochard bred with a pinioned female Canvasback in Britain and raised six young that resembled pochards except in shape (Bristow 1992), and Ferruginous Duck (*A. nyroca*) \times Common Pochard hybrids often resemble Redheads in plumage and shape (Harris et al. 1989).

Since the Common Pochard is intermediate between the Canvasback and Redhead in shape and plumage, Canvasback \times Redhead hybrids could cause real identification problems. This hybrid combination has been reported in the wild in Wisconsin, Virginia (twice), Maryland (twice), and New York (Haramis 1982). More recently, there have been reports from Quebec (Yank and Aubry 1985) and Oregon (Anon. 1989). The Oregon bird, a female, was considered a Common Pochard by some observers, underscoring the need for caution in the identification of females. Haramis (1982) noted the "close resemblance particularly in head and bill structure between hybrid and *A. ferina* specimens" and that "the scapular plumage of *A. ferina* specimens was found to be particularly close to that of the 'Canvasback-type' hybrids." Yank and Aubry (1985) described a "probable hybrid" that closely matched the findings of Haramis. Size is the primary distinction, since hybrids are intermediate between the Canvasback and Redhead, whereas the Common Pochard is smaller than either of those. Culmen lengths of four hybrids were much closer to the mean for the Canvasback than to the mean for the Redhead or Common Pochard (Haramis 1982). In

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an encounter with a suspected Common Pochard, particularly a female, pay close attention to bill size and pattern, overall body size and coloration (generally darker in hybrids), and head shape.

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