

Campbell Island Teal: from discovery to acceptance



When, in 1935, Royal Ontario Museum ornithologist J.H.Fleming described a small brown duck from subantarctic Campbell Island as a new genus and species *Xenonetta nesiotis* he had before him a single worn and faded mounted specimen reportedly collected 50 years previously. A remarkable tale of scientific discovery was about to unfold

Wrote Fleming; *"I am indebted to Capt.T.E.Donne, C.M.G., for the history of the type, it was taken on Campbell Island by Capt.Fairchild of the government ship Stella on his 1886 cruise to 'The Islands' probably in January or February. On the return of Capt. Fairchild to Wellington, the bird was given to Capt. Donne who at once sent it to Mr. E. Jennings of Dunedin to be preserved....Capt. Donne writes that Jennings was always meticulously careful in regard to marking localities on specimens that he preserved. On the bottom of the stand is written 'Flightless Duck, Campbell Island, 1886, ♂'."*

Why did it take so long for the Campbell Island Teal to be reported?

Where had the specimen been for 50 years?

And why had nobody else reported this duck from Campbell Island?

Campbell island was first discovered by sealers in 1810. Numerous sealing vessels reached the island before the first scientific visitors - the British Antarctic Expedition of 1840. The next records of flora and fauna are from 1868 by which time rats "were the scourge of the island". The only duck recorded in 1840 and 1868 was Grey Duck.

Andreas Reischek, the Austrian collector visited Campbell Island with Fairchild on *Stella* in 1888. *"I was informed that the tui and a wingless duck inhabited the island but I did not see any"*, he wrote (1889), thus providing the earliest hint of the teal's existence.



Coincidental with Fleming's first account of the teal, a painting of it was published in a book by Australian ornithologist G.M.Matthews.

The description and painting prompted a notable naturalist of the day, Edgar Stead, to question the authenticity of the specimen's origin. Stead found it *"incredible that no one had heard of it (the specimen) for 50 years. How can it be that Fairchild, if he had taken a flightless duck on Campbell Island, should never have mentioned the extremely interesting fact to Buller"*. W.L.Buller produced books on New Zealand birds and Fairchild provided him with many specimens from the southern islands.



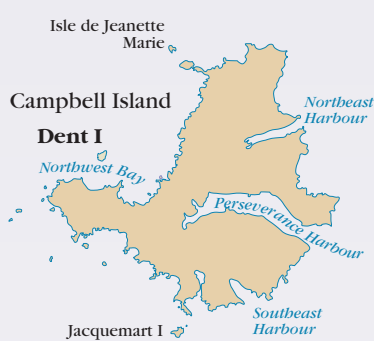
Capt. John Fairchild



Capt. Thomas E. Donne

Fleming responded to Stead's challenge by quoting from a letter from Donne.. *"the bird was given to me because it was regarded as a rara avis as no other specimen had been secured from the island. Capt. Fairchild told me that some of the crew gave chase to it in a boat and one of them killed it with an oar.... I always understood the distinction of this bird arose from the fact that it came from Campbell Island and therefore I kept it for nearly half a century I was not previously aware that it was a different variety to the Flightless Ducks of the Auckland Islands"*.

Murray Williams & Christopher Robertson, Science, Technology and Information Services, Department of Conservation.



The second specimen

The Coastwatchers stationed on the subantarctic islands during WW II were mostly young scientists. The Auckland Islands party of 1943 was led by R.A.Falla (*centre*) (later Director of the Dominion Museum) and included a young meteorologist Ron Balham (*on Falla's right*). They saw many Auckland Island Teal, and when the following year Balham went to Campbell Island, Falla told him to look out for a similar duck there. Sure enough, on 28 May 1944, Balham saw 2 birds in the surf in Northwest Bay and, after failing to secure a specimen by throwing rocks, returned the following day with a gun. He got the male and, thus, removed all doubt about the presence of teal at Campbell Island. But where were they living?



Dent Island

The refuge

Balham's sightings were the only ones of teal for the next 30 years. Meanwhile R.A.Falla speculated (1956) *"It must be exceedingly rare. Campbell Island is over-run with rats and no ground nesting bird has a chance to breed. The outer islets are steep and small and my guess is that the whole population of flightless ducks exists on one known as Dent Island. Unfortunately no-one has had enough enterprise or luck to land on this islet to find out."*

On 12 November 1975, Christopher Robertson and Rodney Russ had the necessary luck and enterprise. A movement amongst the tussock was responded to by a graceless swallow dive and Rodney Russ held high the first female ever seen. Several more sightings, and the presence of teal bones in Skua middens confirmed Falla's suspicions. Dent Island **was** the Campbell Island Teal's refuge but the population was tiny - perhaps only 30-50 individuals.



Rodney Russ with the first female

Conservation response

In February 1984, Murray Williams and Andrew Garrick made the first dedicated survey on Dent Island. This was the start of a conservation initiative that sought to return teal to Campbell Island (once the rats have been eradicated) via two preliminary steps; captive breeding and the subsequent establishment of a temporary population on another subantarctic island. Williams and Garrick returned with "Swampy", the first of 11 birds extracted from Dent Island in 1984 and 1990. 'Swampy' survived to 1999 and left eight descendants in the captive breeding programme.

"Swampy" and flight certificate awarded following his navy helicopter flight from Dent Island



Subsequent research has established that, although clearly descended from Brown Teal on the New Zealand mainland, the Campbell Island Teal has evolved into a distinctive species in its own right. Because of the rat invasion of Campbell Island, teal have been confined solely to Dent Island, and in low numbers (<100), for the past 150 years. Their persistence has almost certainly been due to the presence of high numbers of seabirds nesting on Dent Island whose guano provide food for the teal directly and for insects upon which teal feed.