

Report of a Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Date : 25/12/99 Christmas Day
Time : 5.00 – 5.30pm
Location : Tanah Merah Estuary
Habitat : Open sea, in a bay area
Observers : Kenneth Kee, Low Bingwen
Weather : Sunny
Optics : Kowa Scope with 20-60mm zoom, Swarovski 8x30 bino

Background

On 25 December 1999, I was at Tanah Merah estuary birdwatching with Bingwen. I was looking at some shorebirds at the mudflats when a bird flew over my head and head straight to the sea. In flight, I noticed the white wing bar and dark upperpart and tail. This was something very unusual and I had a shock when it landed in the middle of the estuary. I quickly zoom in with my scope and identified it as a duck. But what is a duck doing in the middle of an open sea?

It kept bobbing up and down with the ocean waves and drifting away further from my sight. I was determined to follow the bird and drove my car nearer to get a better view. The duck stay for about 30 minutes for a good observation and then flew away. No call was heard.

Description

Dark brownish plumage overall except for the lighter brown at the flanks. Brown head and neck. Spoon-shaped grey bill. Some white on face at sides of bill-base. Tail dark, upperpart dark brown. Yellow eye. Size about the same as Lesser Treeduck. Overall description pointed to a possible female Tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*.

Comparisons

The yellow eye and lack of white under tail coverts, rules out the possibility of the female Ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca* and Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri*. The female Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* has a much larger white patch at base of bill compared to the Tufted duck. I have seen six male Tufted Duck and two Baer's Pochard in Northern Thailand at the famous Chiang Saen Lake in January 1998.

Other notes

The duck was again seen on 26 December 1999 morning at the same location by Angus Lamont, Lim Kim Seng, Lim Kim Chuah, Bee Choo, Pik Wah, Alfred Chia, Alan OwYong, Ashley, Sutari, Hua Chew, Trixie, Ding Li and many others. There were four telescopes zoom on the bird for detailed identification and observations. Everybody was amazed to see a duck in the middle of the sea especially in Singapore where ducks are mainly observed at freshwater ponds. It stay for more than an hour and was still there when we left. No further sighting was recorded since that day.

Status and distribution

The Tufted duck breeds in the Arctic and cool N-temperate zone from Iceland across Eurasia to Pacific Russia, in E Asia south to Hokkaido and far NE China. Mostly migratory, wintering in Africa and Asia. Large-scale migration in Asia terminates in Pakistan, N India, N Burma and S China, with little penetration of SE Asia except in the east where some reach Luzon. In Peninsula Malaysia, it is a vagrant with two records: an adult female on the ponds of the fisheries research station, Malacca, during 3-7 February 1972 and a first winter female mist-netted at Fraser's Hill on 10 December 1975 (Wells, 1999). In Thailand, it is a rare winter visitor (Lekagul & Round, 1991).

The Tufted duck is currently not listed in our Singapore checklist. If accepted by the records committee of the Nature Society of Singapore bird group, it will be the first record for Singapore. Could this be a vagrant that has taken off-course?

References

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Jeya & Pearson, (1999). *A field guide to the Birds of West Malaysia and Singapore*. Oxford University Press
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