

An Unusual Display of the Pink-eared Duck

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On November 4, 1958, I drove to the edge of a long, narrow billabong about four miles north of Wentworth, New South Wales. As I approached, a flock of about 200 Pink-eared Ducks (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*), which had been camped on a grassy spit to my right, took flight, flew along the billabong and settled on the water some 200 yards to the left of where I had stopped the car. Pink-ears were abundant in the district at the time and I took but little notice of them, but sat near the water's edge and began to search the shore-line with binoculars for waders. My attention was soon drawn back to the ducks by a striking communal display.

The whole flock was facing directly towards me from a position 200 yards along the billabong and against the opposite bank. Each bird was repeatedly rising up on the water and flapping its wings vigorously for up to ten seconds or so. Up to 75 per cent of the birds were so engaged at any one time so that the impression was given that all were moving simultaneously. Most, if not all, of the birds were uttering whistling calls interspersed with 'clicking' sounds. Suddenly, as if at a given signal, the whole flock—every single bird—dived. The movement was perfectly synchronized, the noisy flapping and calling being immediately relieved by a dramatic silence. A few seconds were spent under water, then each bird surfaced head first and the whole operation was resumed. For some ten minutes this performance was repeated time after time, whilst gradually the flock swam closer to me. An uncanny feeling came over me that this display was directed, threateningly, at me, and as the flock became quite close there could be no doubt that this was not fanciful supposition, but actual fact. There was no other creature on the bank and no other birds on the water or above. I do not think the display was sexual as the billabong was unsuitable for breeding purposes, and despite the presence of many thousands of Pink-ears in the district, all were in flocks and I had obtained no evidence of breeding. Odd birds occasionally raised their heads and bills into the air and gave a whining 'organ' note, a performance usually associated with courtship display, but such birds were in the minority and the act was not directed at any particular bird or birds. Eventually, when the whole flock was not more than twenty yards from me, an air of indecision came over them, the wing-flapping and diving ceased and the birds fell silent. Gradually they drifted past me, odd birds taking alarm and swimming rapidly back, others circling as if undecided which way to go and some taking wing and dropping into

the water almost immediately. Suddenly the whole flock took to the wing, flew low over the water and settled at the spot from which I had originally disturbed it.

To the ordinary bird-watcher such a display was a thrilling experience, but to the student of bird-display, which I am not, it would undoubtedly have been an interesting problem. There is little in the literature concerning the displays of the Pink-ear, but I have communicated the facts of the performance to H. J. Frith of the C.S.I.R.O. Wildlife Survey Section, who has studied the Pink-ear both in the wild and in captivity and his comments have been useful in compiling the following theories and discussion.

The movement towards an observer, who keeps quiet and therefore a little mysterious, is quite common in many birds and is undoubtedly no more than curiosity.

The head and bill raising, indulged in by odd birds on this occasion is, according to Frith, a normal part of courtship display in this species. I had myself noted it in an earlier paper (*Emu*, vol. 57, p. 265) as 'head-bobbing' without appreciating its full significance. It is often suggested that the line between courtship-display and threat is at times narrow and in this connection Frith cites an incident where the same action was used as a threat to other Pink-ears. I have also experienced this at Finley in December 1958. Three pairs of Pink-ears had taken up residence at a small lagoon and appeared to be about to breed. Following some human disturbance on one particular day, one pair flew into the supposed territory of another pair who immediately 'attacked' them with this head and bill-raising display. An interesting feature was that when the intruders retreated, the victors raised on the water and indulged in vigorous wing-flapping.

Apparently then, wing-flapping can be related to threat. John Warham ('The Nesting of the Pink-eared Duck', in *The Wildfowl Trust Ninth Annual Report*) describes how a Pink-ear attacked a Coot (*Fulica atra*) and, having driven it away, completed the action by "raising herself from the water to stretch her wings". This could possibly be confirmation that wing-flapping can be related to threat. However, Konrad Lorenz (*Journal für Ornithologie*, 1941), speaking of a different species of duck says—"as the excitement of the social display rises one of the drakes will rear up in the water and with increasing frequency beat his wings in a peculiarly short and accentuated manner". This description fits very well the wing-flapping of the Pink-ear and it seems quite possible that such behaviour plays a part in the courtship display of this species. If that is so, then the use of it in threat, as witnessed at Wentworth and Finley, suggests that it is so used as a displacement activity derived from a courtship function. The ordinary wing-flapping used frequently by ducks while preening or after settling on the water is not such a vigorous or prolonged action as that described above.

Frith has noted Pink-ears diving when attacked by a Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*). In my earlier paper (*loc. cit.*) I recorded frequent diving of the Pink-ear on the approach of a boat and implied that such action was a form of distraction display to draw attention from young. Possibly that is so, but I think a more correct interpretation would have been that the birds, accompanied by their young and reluctant to leave them, yet increasingly alarmed, dived only as an escape reaction.

At Wentworth, I witnessed a flock of ducks, alarmed at the approach of a car, fly to a position where they had to pass close to a person alighting from the car to regain their former resting spot. They were not willing to swim or fly past the cause of their alarm but at the same time were curious as to its identity. They therefore gradually approached it to satisfy their curiosity, at the same time threatening it. The threatening was undoubtedly bravado, as immediately one member, unable to control its fear, gave way to its escape reaction and dived, the whole flock followed suit. Thus the display stemmed from a combination of curiosity, threat and alarm. They approached with the fighting urge slightly superior to the fleeing urge until they almost reached me, when the fleeing urge started to dominate, causing a moment of indecision. It then immediately took complete control and away they flew.

Crimson x Eastern Rosella Hybrid in the Wild State.—The paper by John Le Gay Brereton and Charles Sourry 'Some Observations on the Distribution and Abundance of Closely-related Parrots of the New England District of New South Wales' (*Emu*, vol. 59, pp. 93-100) has prompted me to place a much-belated Crimson x Eastern Rosella hybrid occurrence on record. In November 1955, when visiting Lorne, Vic., I was informed by Mr. D. Mathews, a local aviculturist, that he had observed an Eastern Rosella and a Crimson Rosella attending a nest in the hollow of a tree in open forest country, approximately seven miles north of Lorne. On my next visit to Lorne I learnt from Mr. Mathews that the pair had hatched two young hybrids which were eventually collected by him for his aviary. One of the youngsters died, the other, an obvious hybrid, was seen by the writer on January 10 and May 20, 1956. The fact that the nesting took place in open forest country is interesting, especially as the Crimson Rosella normally nests in denser forest. Several avicultural books consulted state that both species readily interbreed in captivity and that the hybrid is fertile.—JOHN L. McKEAN, Hampton, Vic., 4/6/59.