



## **Know your ducks - Shoveler**

By Fish & Game officer Tom Winlove

**The New Zealand Shoveler**, also called spoonies because of their spoon shaped bill, is an interesting species of waterfowl. In the maimai we normally hear the jet aircraft type sound as a small flock of them descend rapidly from high altitude. It is their small size and fast speed that makes them a challenging and exciting target for the sportsman.

**Filter feeding is their speciality.** Its large spoon-shaped bill has very fine lamellae (hair-like features) which are attached to the margins of the upper and lower bill. These intermesh and provide an extremely fine filtering mechanism, enabling it to sieve out items of food that are less than 1 mm in size.

While they eat duckweed, small seeds and freshwater insects like back-swimmers, their most important food of all are the microscopic water animals, collectively known as zooplankton. These all live in swarms in the open water and are what Shoveler mostly eat. This feeding occurs largely in lakes or on the open areas of seasonal (ephemeral) water as occurs around Lake Poukawa in winter and spring.

**Shoveler are extremely mobile.** Every year birds move the full length and breadth of New Zealand. Studies carried out in the 70's and 80's revealed the full extent of their movements. Birds banded near Invercargill were shot all over the country with one shot as far north as Kaitaia! Birds banded in Hawke's Bay and the Waikato showed similar widespread dispersal.

**Banding Shoveler** is difficult because they cannot be baited into traps unlike mallard and grey duck. Moulting adults are captured using trained dogs or by herding them like sheep into pens. In 1981 almost 900 Shoveler were caught in one exercise, the largest single capture of Shoveler made anywhere in the world!

**Shoveler are the last waterfowl game bird to breed.** From July onwards, Shoveler start to form large flocks on particular lowland lakes. Over 2000 Shoveler are regularly

counted at Lake Poukawa at this time of the year, making it one of the most significant Shoveler flocking sites in New Zealand.

Because males outnumber females, competition for mates is intense. They court females with head bobbing displays and a variety of “chuff-chuff” calls. Vigorous aerial chases occur, with several males fighting in flight as they pursue a single hen. By September, most pairs have been established. Pairs then leave the wetland and seek the quietness of a nearby drain or small farm pond which they use as their territory. While the female feeds avidly in order to produce eggs, the male vigorously defends her and the territory against other competing Shoveler.

**The nesting season is very short**, for over 80% of all Shoveler eggs are laid in October and November. The hen normally chooses a nest site in rank grass or in carex clumps. The number of eggs laid range from 9-13. The eggs are pale bluish-white and more oval than those of other ducks. One egg is laid per day, and the female does not begin her 25 days of incubation until all eggs have been laid.

Shoveler drakes remain with their females longer than greys or mallards. They don't abandon them until incubation is almost half complete, whereas greys and mallards usually abandon their mates after about five day's incubation. But in all three species, the male plays no part in the rearing of the young.

This article has used material published in a small book, *The Duckshooter's Bag*, by Murray Williams published in 1981. It is out of print but worth buying if you come across it in a secondhand bookshop. Murray was a renowned waterfowl biologist with the former NZ Wildlife Service.