Grey teal – reviving a spectacular success story stopped dead in its tracks

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Background:

In 2014 on behalf of all regional Fish and Game Councils, the Chief Executive of Fish and Game NZ wrote to the Minister of Conservation, Hon. Dr. Nick Smith, asking that he, “initiate a process within his department to make grey teal a designated gamebird”. To date, the Minister has simply stated his Department will look into it, when their resources allow. This is the same offer made by his Department in 2011 and by Smith’s predecessor, Hon. Kate Wilkinson, in 2009. In fact, the government has repeatedly suggested since 1959 that it would make grey teal a gamebird, but has yet to follow through.

How did we get to this point? Where do we go to from here?

Why is a status change needed?

Grey teal, (Anas gracilis), are found primarily in Australia and New Zealand but also in New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. They are a very abundant and stable species numbering 1.1 million overall, of which some 120,000 are found in New Zealand - about the same overall number as the NZ shoveler. The difference is that NZ shoveler have always been a gamebird in NZ, but grey teal have never been. This would come as a great surprise to Australian hunters who, for instance, in 2014 in the state of Victoria, have a 3 month long season and a 10 bird limit on grey teal.

It is in fact one of the commonest ducks in Australian hunters’ bags and always has been. Grey teal are probably the easiest duck in New Zealand to manage and to increase in number through nest boxes. At a time when mallards are arguably climate stressed in some regions, grey teal are instead well adapted to drought in their native land and are perhaps the most future-proof of all ducks in our country.

“Closing the gaps”. Australian hunters have liberal grey teal seasons and limits.
They have no known downside; they do not cause crop damage and they do not hybridize with either native or introduced NZ species. Right around the world teal of various species are recognized as extremely sporting ducks and also among the very best eating.

Special early teal seasons in the USA create very considerable economic spinoffs – as they could do here. So what is there to decide?

*Grey teal now number 1.1 million in Australasia.*

**A little history:**

It’s accepted by all that grey teal are an Australian duck that has self-introduced into NZ – but when? It has often assumed that because Maori had a name for grey teal; “tete”, that it must have been common in pre-history times, but this name simply means small duck and was equally applied to both grey teal and NZ shoveler. Archaeologists also once assumed that grey teal must have been well established in NZ as their bones were common in excavated prehistoric Maori middens. But a more careful re-examination since has showed most of these were misidentified juvenile grey ducks. Nineteenth century bird authorities had no doubts that the very rarely seen grey teal in NZ were just stragglers and vagrants from Australia. In this country the species bordered on extinction and museums around 1900 would wait decades to get a single example to put on display or to study.

*Above: first officially documented grey teal nest in NZ, in Gladstone, NZ, on October 1, 1944, courtesy Alexander Turnbull Library*
In fact, it wasn’t until 1944 that the first grey teal nest was officially found in New Zealand. However, surveys by birdwatchers around this period also showed this small bridgehead of grey teal in the Wairarapa had begun to grow and naturally expand. By the late 1950’s they’d also established at Rotorua. Then, in 1957, small numbers of a whole variety of Australian waterbird species arrived in this country, fleeing severe droughts in their homeland. When a single banded grey teal from Australia turned up in NZ in 1960, the only one ever to do so before or since, it generated the idea that the increase of grey teal in NZ was due to a “recent influx” from Australia. This ad hoc theory by Ken Miers of the Wildlife Service got some people over-exited and they assumed that grey teal must not only be regularly arriving in numbers from, but also returning to Australia every year – and actually sustaining the NZ population. However in the more than 5 decades elapsed since, not one more banded grey teal has ever made that journey to NZ and been recovered and certainly none are known to have flown the 2,500km back. In other words, the population we have here today is governed by local production, nothing more.

First proposed in 1959.

As early as 1959 the Wildlife Service signalled that grey teal could be our next gamebird in NZ. This was formally discussed by government’s Fauna Protection Advisory Council in 1967. This considered an application by acclimatisation societies to have grey teal added to the game-bird licence as a ‘mistake bird’ with a daily bag limit of one. Mr Sibson, the Ornithological Society representative stated that,

“He had been studying the grey teal with some care for the last few years, and did not feel that the time was yet ripe to put it on the shooting list. It was still virtually unknown north of Auckland. On the whole it was still rather rare and he doubted that the total population of the country would reach 10,000. He felt it needed all the protection possible”.

Mr Cavanagh of the Wildlife Service, Department of Internal Affairs, was then on record as believing that they “could see no benefit in the proposition” as grey teal were very hard to distinguish from grey ducks, “and it is unlikely that, in the event of a genuine mistake having been made, prosecution would follow”. To put the bird on the licence as well, “would be tantamount to exaggerating the kill”.

This decision, while sound at the time, continued to dictate Wildlife Service policy for decades to come. However over that time the grey teal population increasing 12-fold, (despite Mr Sibson’s predictions), to now number 120,000 nationwide, (Teal, 2000). These concerns are simply no longer valid.

4,000 nest boxes:
Hunters had not been sitting idly on their hands during this time. At the instigation of Hamilton-based hunter and waterfowl enthusiast Jack Worth, an organization called Ducks Unlimited (NZ) Incorporated embarked in 1974 on a programme of building and erecting nest boxes nation-wide specifically for grey teal and with the stated intention of making them a gamebird.

DU President, Neil Hayes wrote prophetically in 1977:

“Operation Gretel involves raising the (grey teal) population to 100,000 over a 10-year period by erecting suitable nesting boxes in well-known grey teal areas”.

Tom Caithness, one of the Wildlife Services’ chief waterfowl scientists, acknowledged in 1982 the pronounced effect that Ducks Unlimited’s grey teal nest box programme, called ‘Operation Gretel’, was beginning to have. He wrote:

“Teal virtually line up to get into these boxes. In one area of the Waikato, the birds defend boxes by standing on top of them and many of the boxes may be used in succession by two or more pairs. Over 1500 eggs were laid in 104 boxes in one year”.

By 1988 Tom Caithness was saying in his annual Wildlife Service report to gamebird hunters:

“I’ve been saying for years that in some areas of the country they could go on the licence, not generally, but in defined areas”.
NZ hunters have been putting up grey teal nest boxes for 40 years; 1974 - 2014.

Since then some 4,000 grey teal nest boxes have been erected around NZ by waterfowl hunters using their own resources; not taxpayer dollars nor gamebird licence money.

The Beau Geste theory of grey teal abundance.

Beau Geste is the name of a fictional film hero who propped up dead foreign legion soldiers in the battlements of their fort, then under siege, so these corpses appeared from a distance to be defending it. The handful of remaining live defenders then randomly fired shots from these dead soldiers’ rifles to give the appearance that they were all still alive. This ruse by the few clever survivors averted an imminent attack on the fort. In the same way, it was a long held theory of the Wildlife Service and later DoC that small populations of grey teal were everywhere at once too:

“Some hunters are anxious to put grey teal on the licence. This is unlikely to happen in the near future. Recent work has shown that grey teal are a highly mobile bird, a hundred or so seen on say Lake Wairarapa on one day can ben up in Hawkes Bay or in South Canterbury the following day. This behaviour gives the impression that there are many more teal than there actually are. Our marking programme and NZ wide census indicates that the total population is in the order of only 15-18,000 birds. Too few to put on the licence”. (Caithness 1973).

However Phil Teal’s nation-wide opening day survey done since, in the year 2000, eliminated such a bias by having observers at all these places, all at once. This proved that there was by then a population of 120,000 grey teal nationwide. They didn’t just seem to be everywhere – they were!

DoC and its predecessor the Wildlife Service too could see that teal numbers were increasing. When the population reached 12-18,000 grey teal in NZ, Tom Caithness in his Wildlife Service annual waterfowl hunting diary to NZ hunters stated that grey teal could come on the licence, “as early as 1985”.

As rare as kakapo – according to the law.

In 1953, under the then new Wildlife Act, if someone was successfully prosecuted for shooting a grey teal, the penalty was a maximum of 50 pounds. However in the year 2000, NZ’s government was seriously concerned about smuggling of rare and endangered NZ fauna such as tuatara from offshore islands. When interviewed on TV, high-profile international animal smugglers simply laughed at these outdated fines. Embarrassed by this, Parliament immediately responded by raising the penalty for possession of any Fully Protected Species to $100,000 plus $ 5,000 per head – and/or 6 months in jail. It’s unlikely that Cabinet ever considered the spin-off effects of their new legislation on gamebird hunters. However the effect was to treat anyone who accidentally shot a grey teal as if they had deliberately smuggled a highly endangered kakapo or takahe. This 1,000-fold increase in fines had the effect of stopping Ducks Unlimited’s Operation Gretel nest box programme dead in its tracks. Every hunter now realized that making and/or annually servicing nest boxes only meant more grey teal flying around and, no matter how careful they were, increased their risk of these hugely punitive fines, or jail or both. Since grey teal routinely fly in formation with other species of legal ducks, the risk of an accidental shooting was very real. These hunters may as well have deliberately shot a kiwi for all the new law knew or cared.

Despite assurances given to Fish & Game by DoC’s advisers at the time of this Cabinet decision, that these new penalties would never be used to prosecute anyone shooting grey teal and that hunters “had nothing to fear”, there is a saying that, “If a law can be abused, sooner or later it will be”. Two hunters soon afterwards found themselves in the Lower Hutt District Court and had to be defended by a friend in court, past-president of Ducks Unlimited NZ Inc, Neil Hayes. Neil explained to the judge the absurdity of such a fine given that hunters had created so many thousands of grey teal themselves. However with all the resultant media publicity, the message about the punitive new fines and/or jail for grey teal were now fully ‘out there’. The damage to DoC’s reputation was profound as many of the hunter-volunteers felt they had been misled for decades by the Department and by its’ successive Ministers.

Recent law revisions.

Auckland Waikato Fish & Game Council subsequently petitioned then Conservation Minister Hon. Kate Wilkinson to recognize that treating a common duck a like a rare and endangered species when it numbers 120,000 nationwide, (with 1 million more in Australasia), was only serving to bring NZ’s wildlife laws into disrespect. As a result of this lobbying in 2009, the Minister reduced the maximum fine for shooting a grey teal to that for any other gamebird shot out of season - “just” $5,000.
NZ hunters still face serious fines for shooting just 1 grey teal.

But the Minister failed at the next hurdle, to honour the Government’s long repeated pledge to make grey teal a game bird when their numbers warranted it. Wilkinson’s efforts were too little and too late to save the grey teal nest box programme by rekindling the by now thoroughly demoralised volunteers hopes and aspirations. They had spent 40 years servicing these nest boxes annually for nothing. In fact, Wilkinson considered that Iwi should have first dibs on grey teal as a “traditional” and “customary harvest” bird” even though there is little to support a claim that grey teal had ever been anything more than a rare straggler from Australia in pre-European times - (i.e., there was no “tradition”).

Iwi harvest now made possible.

DoC must have liked the idea of “customary harvest” because they wrote to 200 Iwi groups around NZ looking for their support for this part of their Wildlife Schedule Review. They got just 1 reply. However, the reason grey teal were moved to the 3rd Schedule of the Wildlife Act as “Wildlife that may be hunted or killed subject to Minister of Conservation”, was precisely so the Minister could now sanction such “customary harvests”. To date, however, not a single application has been received since the law change was made in July of 2010. At the same time, the government had received 58 submissions out of a total of 64 in the Review, wanting to put grey teal on the game licence, (which is to say on the 1st Schedule of the Wildlife Act). Despite this being the most requested change asked of the Review, these submitters were all deliberately ignored.

DoC’s Review of Level of Protection of Some New Zealand Wildlife completely dismissed the idea that Maori in modern times might want to hunt grey teal using shotguns in the typical manner that all hunters in NZ have done for centuries. In fact Captain Cooks’ crew were the first to shoot ducks this way in 1769.
Maori were quick to trade for the new technology:

“From the early 1800s the purchase of firearms dominated the Maori economy... Firearms had a cultural impact and quickly became status symbols.

In some communities, there were so many spare firearms that many were hung in houses purely as ornaments...

In the mid-19th century the New Zealand Maori population possibly had the highest level of firearms ownership of any people in history. Practically every adult male, and a fair few females, owned at least one firearm. It is quite possible that of all the peoples of history, Maori spent the largest proportion of their available economic surplus upon arms and ammunition”.

Apparently completely unaware of this, the Review condescendingly ruled out such technology and referred only to paving the way for the Maori to once again use “traditional” and “customary harvest” for “eggs and flappers” using “nets and snares”:

“Gamebird regulations do not provide for customary harvest... the traditional way to harvest native waterfowl was through the use of nets and snares and the taking of ‘flappers’, (young birds that have yet to fly or older birds during the moult). However the Wildlife Act allows gamebirds to be harvested only recreationally, and then only by shooting with a shotgun while the bird is in flight”, (DoC 2008).

In centuries past, traditional moult hunts such as this are on record as killing many thousands of waterfowl in single hunts and were indiscriminate as to species. What are now protected species were then an inevitable by-catch and some were never seen again.

It is unlikely that snares would work with grey teal as they once did with mass-moulting waterfowl species that were rounded up on large lakes using canoes and then driven into the waiting snares set just above water level. It’s not known exactly where in NZ grey teal moult, but it is presumed to instead be in small groups inside unnavigable willow-choked swamps. The only practical ways hunters could “customary harvest” grey teal in such situations is using dogs. A dog cannot be trained to recognize a common grey teal from a highly endangered brown teal or any other fully protected species. It’s a bit late when it’s dead to throw it back.

If, as we suspect, grey teal moult in willow-choked wetlands, then it would be a considerable physical and logistical effort for humans to catch them even a small numbers.
The NZ Army used these very same willow-choked Waikato wetlands as a selection course for its Special Air Service commandos. Teal are not to be compared with fat and easy to find muttonbirds. The generic word ‘teal’ actually means ‘small duck’ so next to muttonbirds, they are just ⅔ the size – and at ‘flapper’ stage, smaller and skinnier still. No one would show a profit catching and selling grey teal “flappers” – assuming they could find them in the first place.

The second, much more practical “customary harvest” option that DoC identified in their Review after ‘flappers’ is to harvest eggs.

However wild grey teal nests would be near-impossible to find, yet alone in any meaningful number. The only practical alternative would be to rob nesting boxes.

This is an extremely wasteful process because all eggs initially found have to be destroyed to ensure that all the birds re-lay to provide only eggs of a known age; so at least 2 eggs are taken for every 1 that is consumed.

No one knows if grey teal can then continue to produce a third replacement clutch to maintain their population after their first 2 clutches have been taken. In fact ducks normally abandon traditional nesting sites if they’re disturbed and unsuccessful, so this harvest could quickly render entire nest box complexes useless.

*Pictured: Nest box eggs ruined in 2008 flood. Nest robbing would mimic this disaster twice every year.*

Spring hunting is banned in most countries now because of its close links with many waterfowl species extinction. NZ already has a large number of prehistoric waterfowl extinctions associated with
subsistence spring hunting for “eggs and flappers” with dogs and snares.

It should also be remembered also that Ducks Unlimited’s many teal nest boxes were put up and maintained by groups of volunteer gamebird hunters and mostly on private land. These have been maintained by having their nesting material changed every year and any repairs done – for decades. Having someone new turn up with a permit from DoC to “rob” these eggs, (which is the actual term used for such egg recovery), out of these private boxes is likely to create both conflict and adverse publicity. It’s doubtful that DoC planners thought through any of these issues when they came up with their “traditional” and “customary harvest” of “eggs and flappers” idea in their ‘Review of Level of Protection for some New Zealand Wildlife; Public Discussion Document’ in 2006.

Despite the Reviews claim under the heading “Grey Teal”, that there were, “strong aspirations among Maori to be able to harvest native wildlife”, not a single application has yet been received by DoC to do so. The pointless presence of grey teal in the 3rd Schedule for that purpose is simply proof that the department got it wrong. In fact, the “strong aspirations” were actually those 58 shooters submissions that the Review deliberately ignored, that wanted this species put on the 1st Schedule as a gamebird. This Australian species is and has always been one of Australia’s principle game birds and so it is, by definition, a gamebird per se as much as any other species on the 1st Schedule such as, for instance, red legged or grey partridge.

**Potential benefits for all parties.**

The Review did not seem to have comprehend that, on the ground, many thousands of Maori already hunt game birds using shotguns, in the defined gamebird hunting season, as they have done since such gamebird seasons first became law in the 1860’s. In the 14 years since it was proven grey teal now number at 120,000 nationwide, more than adequate to support a carefully regulated gamebird harvest, thousands of Maori hunters - just like all other recreational gamebird hunters, would have benefited by being able to bag a grey teal whenever one flew over their decoys. So rather than benefiting Maori, this condescending DoC idea that Maori can only use “traditional” and “customary harvest” methods to recover “eggs and flappers” with “nets and snares” is a complete failure.

While grey teal are in this state of legal limbo, about 30,000 of this short-lived species die every year of old age and other mortality, feeding nothing but hawks and rats. Teal species are highly praised by gourmets worldwide as being, “widely considered the finest eating of all the wild ducks… should be seized on and relished at every opportunity… they are a cherished addition to any (hunter’s) bag”. Grey teal are no exception to this general rule and Australian hunter’s state: “grey teal are considered one of our best eating ducks”. Why does our Government like rats to dine like kings in NZ but hunters to go hungry?
Considerable potential economic benefits.

Teal hunting, (in Australia, the UK, Europe, North and South America), is so popular overseas that counties like the USA now hold special early teal seasons in 23 out of their 50 US states in addition to their regular season teal hunting in 49 of those US states. Teal hunting providers considerable economic benefits to the community, (very often from spending in struggling rural communities), by hunters buying boats, outboards, 4-wheel drives, accommodation, guides, gas, meals, dogs and specialist sporting equipment such as expensive firearms and hunting clothing. Although unquantified in NZ, the economic expenditure by hunters overseas is measured in billions of dollars and in the US, for instance, exceeds that of their entire motion picture industry, to give but one example. Having grey teal as a semi-protected species in NZ adds nothing to our economy and certainly does nothing for tourism. Extra income from having grey teal on the gamebird licence is denied to Fish & Game’s many wetland and waterfowl management activities that benefit all our native and introduced waterfowl species, game and non-game alike, and to the benefit of wetland habitat protection generally.

What value protection?

Currently DoC spend nothing on grey teal as a Schedule 3 species. No budget is allocated for grey teal research, nor propagation, nor monitoring or indeed, anything else for this common, introduced Australian duck. We do we not blame this department, with their severely slashed budgets, for not spending anything on a common Australian duck as a Schedule 3 semi-protected species, when there are many more pressing demands, such as our unique, rare and endangered flora and fauna. But this only proves that further that semi-protection has nothing to offer grey teal and that it needs to find a new legal home.

As a Schedule 1 gamebird, grey teal would have a new authority responsible for it - the Fish & Game Council. By law (Conservation Act, 1987), F&G need to monitor and manage all the species that they are responsible for. If grey teal were gazetted as a gamebird F&G would need to:

1. assess and monitor their population, (S.26Q-a);
2. maintain breeding programmes, where required, (S. 26Q-b); (e.g. nest boxes)
3. implement research where required, (26Q-e); (e.g. banding).
4. recommend harvest conditions, when local populations could sustain such harvest, (26-Q-b-3)
5. incorporate this species into regional F&G Management Plans and Annual Work Plans, (S.26Q-3).
US precedent shows the way.

Such nest box programmes have demonstrated overseas, in the parallel case of the American wood duck, *(Aix sponsa)*, what can be achieved. Exactly like grey teal, the wood duck was considered very nearly extinct in 1900, when spring hunting for commercial purposes had all but exterminated them. However now it is one of the most important of recreational duck-hunters quarry there today, numbering in the millions. It is, in fact, one of the world’s greatest waterfowl conservation success stories with no known downside. But this breakthrough was only achieved when wood duck had their protective status taken off them in the 1950’s, when it was realized it had nothing more to offer them. Waterfowl scientists then wrote:

“When the program first started there was no open season for the wood duck, and many sportsmen resented its continued protected status. Perpetual protection was not the answer. It was felt that it was impossible to build up the wood duck stock by prohibition alone. It is difficult to encourage real protection or interest in the restoration of a species which is no longer regarded as an asset by sportsmen. Nothing more could be expected from further restrictions as the limit had been reached in this direction. Many wood ducks were shot anyway, both by those ignorant of the law or the regulations. These incidents served to result in a loss of respect for the law and its enforcement.

“It was then decided to take the program to the sportsmen’s clubs and all conservation-minded groups and individuals throughout the state, and ask them to aid in the program by putting up nesting boxes in desirable sites in their locality. Because of the visual results obtainable in ducks and broods, the response to the program was heartening; and by tapping the energy and interests of several thousand sportsmen the results were spectacular. By 1950 co-operators and state personnel had erected over 4,000 boxes. In the 2 years 1949 and 1950 it was found that a minimum of 12,000 ducklings scrambled from these boxes. It was then felt the claim that a harvestable surplus had been created was justified, and the season was opened in 1951 subject to the one-in-possession limit of federal regulations.

“People appreciate and care best for what they have themselves produce. Sportsmen who have participated in the program and have a stake in the wood duck’s future would be just as anxious as the division to restrict the season if it should prove necessary. In addition, the very large number of wood duck nesting boxes that are checked will serve as an excellent barometer to warn of any reduction in the breeding stock. (McLaughlin and Grice, 1952).
The wood duck species natural history very closely parallels the grey teal. In fact, the current grey teal nest box used in New Zealand is a direct copy of the American wood duck one.

The primary difference between grey teal and wood duck management in the US is that our New Zealand government seems unable to take the next step to success by making the grey teal a gamebird. In 2014 the Minister Hon. Dr. Nick Smith wrote: “I will ask the Department of Conservation to consider this project for inclusion in future work programmes”. This is precisely what his department said in January 2011 and his predecessor Hon. Kate Wilkinson wrote in July, 2009.

The way ahead.

The future for grey teal, depends on how much NZ gamebird hunters fight for it. Persistence and common sense must surely pay off. We owe it to the great many old guys who serviced these boxes for 40 years to bring that date forward. Similarly, we owe it to the new generation of waterfowl hunters. To young hunters who desperately want to shoot their first duck, a grey teal is tailor-made.

Grey teal should be a gamebird in every region that has an active monitoring programme in place to ensure a sustainable harvest. Conservative harvest regulations would ensure no more grey teal were hunted than hunters nest boxes actually produce. It’s no exaggeration to say that, with the right incentives from Government, nest boxes could double the numbers of this species more easily than any other NZ gamebird.

Caption: NZ hunters have been putting up grey teal nest boxes for 40 years; 1974 - 2014.

The nest box complex at Tony Flexman’s farm in Maramarua showed what impressive results can be achieved. Flocks of 600 grey teal used to wheel in the sky over these boxes every spring, where only odd birds had been seen before this initiative was undertaken. Tony, like a number of other life-long, dedicated wetland volunteers, died waiting for Government to honour their promises.

Then Conservation Minister Hon. Kate Wilkinson wrote in 2009:

“I am aware of the longstanding desire of Waikato gamebird hunters to be able to hunt grey teal and the considerable volunteer effort that has gone into breeding support to increase bird numbers. The Department of Conservation agrees that there are now sufficient grey teal to sustain a small harvest, in the Waikato at least. A recent departmental report to me also highlighted the need for uncertainty for those involved in the breeding work to be resolved”.

It is well within the Conservation Minister’s powers to honour the more than 5 decades of past promises to hunter-volunteers by a simple Schedule change to place this bird to 1st Schedule. Only this would re-kindl what has been one of New Zealand’s great wetland success stories. Nothing less than this Schedule change will undo the layers of mistrust among grey teals’ benefactors that currently exists.

Operation Gretel this year celebrates its 40th anniversary, (1974-2014), but the entire programme will collapse without this level of political support.