

THE FALKLAND ISLANDS FLIGHTLESS STEAMER DUCK AT MARTIN MERE: A BRIEF HISTORY.

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The Falkland Islands Flightless Steamer Duck *Tachyeres brachypterus* is a large, sexually dimorphic coastal duck endemic to the Falkland Islands. The term "flightless" is a slight misnomer as they can fly low over the water but never attain any height. Wild birds breed from September to December usually in tussock grass or abandoned burrows. Outside the breeding season they may be found in pairs, family parties or larger flocks. They feed by upending or diving, usually at sea but occasionally in freshwater pools. They are extremely aggressive, especially the more massively built drakes. Captive breeding of this species has been achieved irregularly with few published records (Gewalt, 1968; Schmidt, 1969).

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust centre at Martin Mere near Burscough, Lancashire has had a long association with the Falkland Island Flightless Steamer Duck and the following account provides a brief history of the species in captivity at this centre.

The First Pair

During 1974 the first pair arrived at Martin Mere. These were captive-bred individuals originating from adults hatched from the wild collected eggs during the 1960's and maintained at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge. These were housed in a pen measuring 15 x 5m and comprising 60% land and 40% water. The land area consisted mostly of grass with a small group of bushes close to the water. They were fed on a diet identical to that used at Slimbridge i.e. Beta dried dog food and trout pellets. The birds appeared to settle well but the female expired after seven months from visceral gout. The drake died after twelve months; an x-ray had revealed a metal staple in his gut and the bird did not recover from an operation to remove it. Post mortem revealed amyloidosis of the kidneys. The latter condition and the visceral gut observed in the female may have indicated too high a protein content in the diet. The swallowing of foreign bodies as observed in the drake is a common phenomenon and has been reported as a cause of death in other collections, presumably because these birds are used to swallowing hard objects i.e. shellfish, crustacea in the wild.



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