



dabbling with **DUCKS**

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK ANDERSON

Worldwide there are 163 species of ducks and geese, 16 of which occur in southern Africa as breeding residents and three as occasional vagrants from the northern hemisphere. It is interesting that southern Africa does not support a greater diversity of anatids, and less than half the number of species found in North Africa or Europe occur in the region. An alien species, the Mallard, has established feral populations, following artificial introductions.

All of the southern African ducks range widely to take advantage of seasonally inundated wetlands and temporarily abundant supplies of food. The conservation status of these birds is fairly secure, as most species benefit from agriculture and the construction of impoundments; only the African Pygmy-Goose is listed as Near Threatened. ▶



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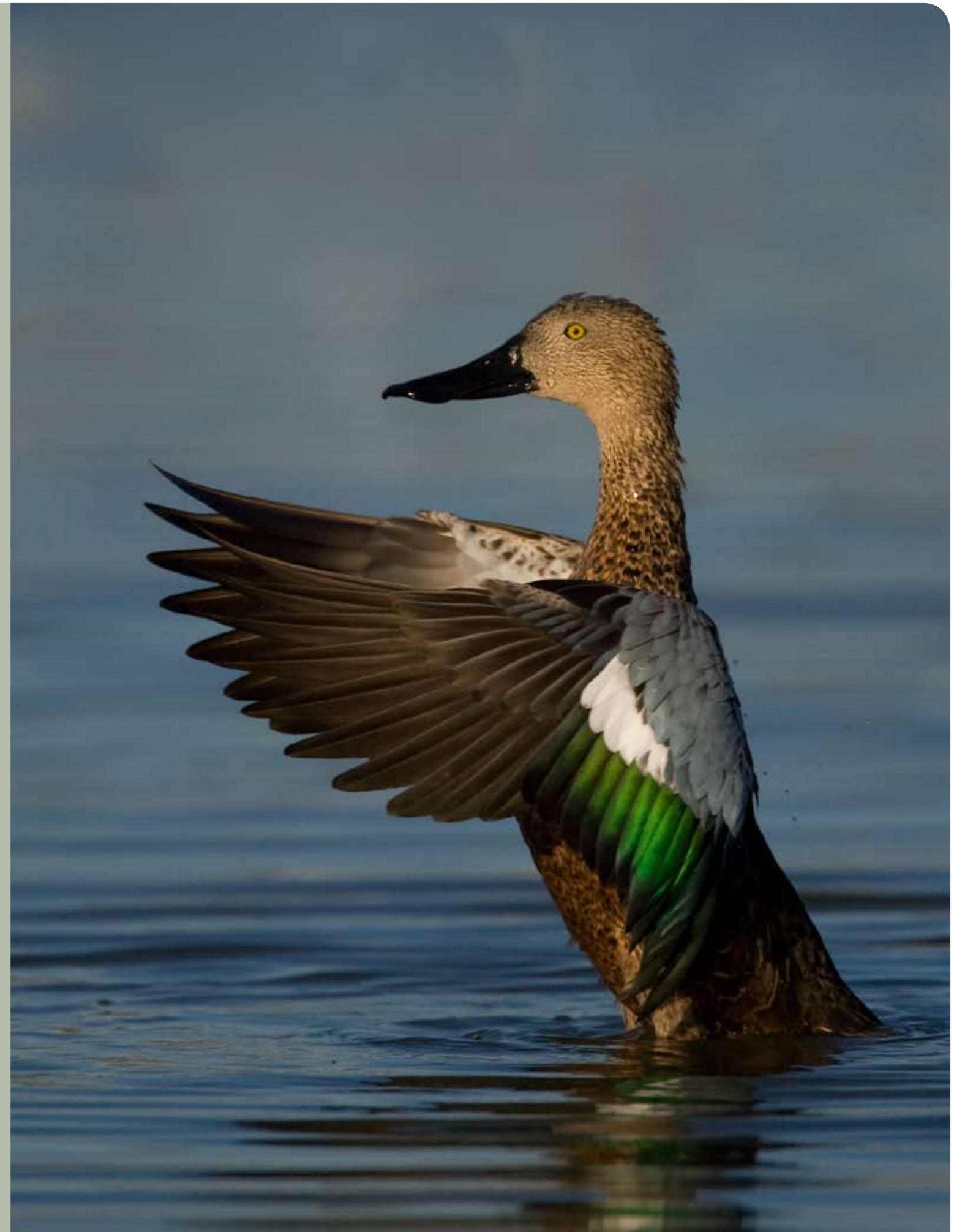
ABOVE & RIGHT

The **Cape Shoveler** *Anas smithii* is a southern African near-endemic, as its range extends marginally into southern Angola. It moves around widely, most likely in response to the availability of temporary vlei habitat and food. When flushed, it rises steeply, with noisy wing beats, and flies strongly at up to 80–90 kilometres an hour. The yellow eye, black beak and bright orange legs distinguish the male Cape Shoveler from its drabber mate. The upperparts of the wing are beautifully marked with grey-blue, white and metallic blue-green.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH **Cape Teals** *Anas capensis* are monogamous, which allows them to take advantage of unpredictable breeding opportunities. Their elaborate courtship displays serve to strengthen the pair bond, especially during the important period immediately preceding the breeding season.

INSET The pale plumage, pink bill and red eye are diagnostic of this small dabbling duck. It prefers saline or brackish waters, but also frequents a variety of other wetland types. Cape Teals feed on both animal and plant material, including insect larvae, tadpoles, crustaceans and aquatic plants.



The diminutive Hottentot Teal, southern Africa's smallest duck species, weighs about 250 grams



The **Southern Pochard** *Netta erythrophthalma* is the region's only dark brown duck. Although not particularly vocal, it gives a nasal squawk as it rises from the water. In flight, it reveals a distinct white wing bar along its flight feathers, and it lacks a speculum. It is the most mobile of the anatids: ring-recovery records show extensive movements in sub-Saharan Africa and, for example, six southern African-ringed birds have been recovered at Lake Naivasha in Kenya.

The diminutive **Hottentot Teal** *Anas hottentota*, southern Africa's smallest duck species, weighs about 250 grams and is about half the size and weight of the Red-billed Teal, which it closely resembles. The Hottentot Teal is distinguished by its blue bill, dark cap and the dark smudge on its creamy cheeks.