

Notes

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: a case of intraspecific brood parasitism?

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In the autumn of 2010 several Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula* were recorded at a 2 ha pond in private property on the north coast of Dublin city. As this was the first record for the site, permission was obtained from the land owner to monitor events. Birds were recorded occasionally during 2011 and 2012, but nesting was never suspected. Five males and four females were present regularly in spring and early summer 2013, and copulation was observed in mid-June. It soon became evident from the behaviour of the birds that nest prospecting or egg-laying was taking place at a dense patch of aquatic vegetation at one side of the pond. At the time it did not seem out of place that more than one female loitered in this particular area. More frequent observations were made in July, and on 17 July a female, with 18 newly hatched ducklings, was seen at the suspected nest site. Over the following days and weeks all ducklings remained close to this one female, even when other females occasionally visited the pond.

Eighteen ducklings from one nest is an exceptionally high number as Tufted Ducks normally lay 8 to 11 eggs (Robinson 2015). It is entirely possible, though not likely, that this female laid all 18 eggs. In itself this would be a noteworthy event. However, the presence of more than one female close to the nest site at the time when egg-laying was likely to have taken place suggests a different explanation. Ducks are weak defenders of the area in the immediate vicinity of their nests during the laying period, and it would appear this provides an ideal opportunity for parasitic females to lay their eggs (Ehrlich *et al.* 1994). This behaviour, known as intraspecific

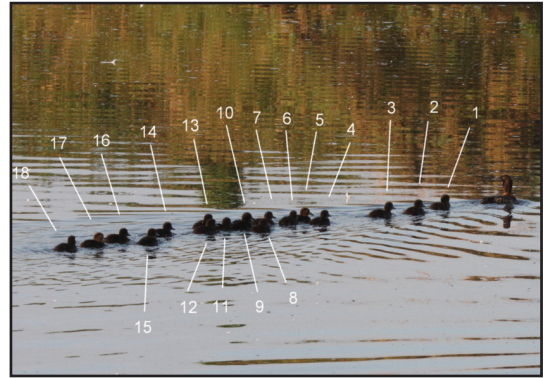


Plate 142. Female Tufted Duck with 18 newly hatched ducklings, Dublin, 17 July 2013 (Tom Cooney).

brood parasitism, is not uncommon in wildfowl species, particularly diving ducks (Blums *et al.* 2002). It also appears to occur disproportionately in species with precocial young (Dugger & Blums 2001). There are no benefits for the host females, and it is likely that an increased clutch and brood size could potentially attract more predators, thereby reducing breeding success. Only five of the 18 ducklings observed in July survived to fledging. Intraspecific brood parasitism is strongly suspected to have taken place at this site in 2013.

References

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