

# Hardhead

*Aythya australis*

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Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Adult male Hardhead (note the distinctly bi-coloured bill, pearl-grey at the distal end which creates the impression of a “blue bill”). Photo by Steph Owen.

## Description

The Hardhead is a diving duck and is the only Australian species from a group of worldwide ducks known as ‘pochards’, which specialise in diving for food. It is a medium-sized duck with a dark-brown head and body, white belly and white vent. In flight, the underwings are white with a thin brown trim, and the brown upper wings have long broad white panels. When flying, the wings make a distinctive whirring sound.

There are no sub-species. Adult males have several differences to adult females – their plumage is darker, their iris is white instead of dark brown, the basal two-thirds of their bill is a much darker grey colour, while the distal third of the bill is a bright pearl-grey colour compared with pale-grey for the females. The brightly coloured bill can sometimes cause less-experienced birdwatchers to mis-identify the male as a Blue-billed Duck (a smaller bird which is rather uncommon in the Hunter Region).

The iris of immature males is hazel-brown, and their bill is almost uniformly

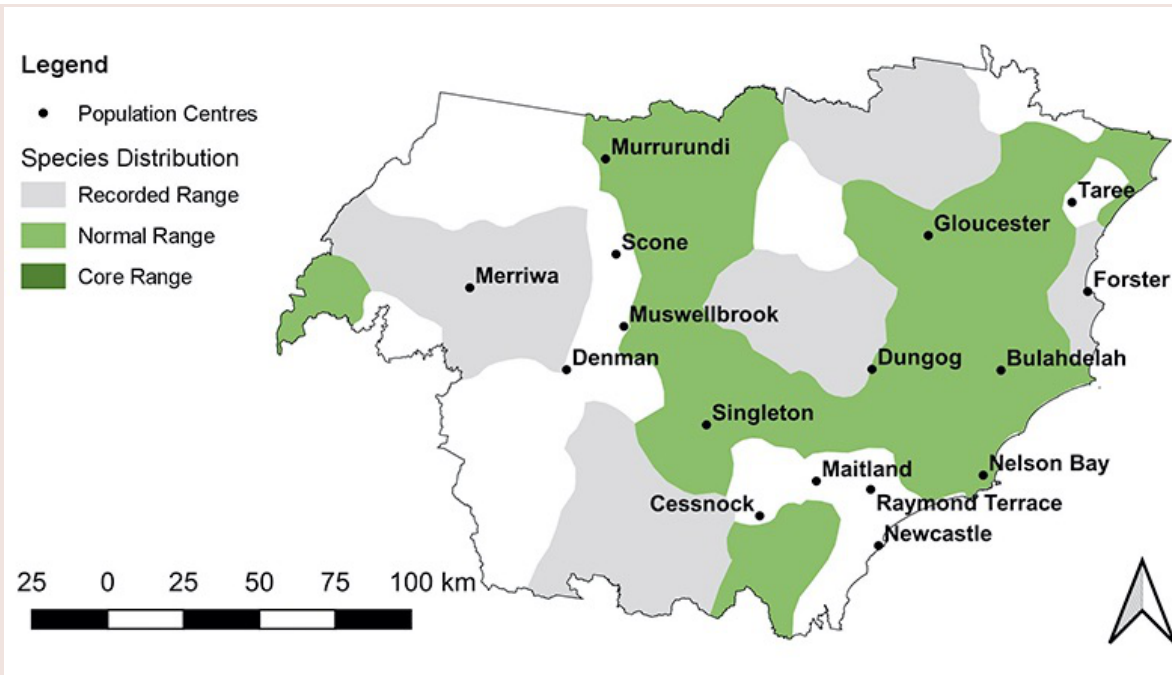
coloured. It is not known at what age the males develop their white iris. Birds are able to breed by the end of their first year. Only the females incubate. The downy young have yellow face and underparts, and dark upperparts with cream-white patches on the sides of the rump and where the wings join the body.



Female Hardhead showing brown iris and generally paler plumage and less distinctly bi-coloured bill compared with the adult male. Photo by Rob Palazzi.

### Regional Status

The Hardhead is a common resident for us, found at medium to large bodies of water anywhere in the region. There probably also are irruptive visits by inland or southern birds when conditions are more favourable here than in their normal locations. When conditions are harsh they can appear at any size of body of water, so long as it is of sufficient depth.



Distribution map for Hardhead (map prepared by Dan Williams)

## About the name

Hardhead

Fraser and Gray state that the name was coined by shooters and reflect that the bird is hard to kill (because of it possessing “very dense plumage and great stamina”!!).

Taxidermy was once a very popular pastime in Australia and a more plausible explanation of the origin of the name is that those early taxidermists found that the head was the most difficult part of the duck to process (presumably because of the bird’s domed crown). I first heard this explanation more than 30 years ago, and it’s also the one that BirdLife Australia offer on their website.

### *Aythya australis*

The genus name means seabird, a direct translation from the Greek word *aithuia* (the term was coined by the ancient Greeks for a sea-duck or perhaps an Auklet) The Greek writer Homer used *aithuia* as a simile for a minor marine goddess *Leucothea* who emerged from the sea to save Odysseus from drowning and then promptly dived back into the waves again.

The globally-distributed genus *Aythya* are diving ducks, a la that Greek goddess; their 12-species contingent includes various scaup and pochards and the delightful Tufted Duck. The species name *australis* means “southern” and is geographically descriptive. Our bird is found in Australia, New Guinea, New Zealand, and the islands of the Pacific (NZ also has the New Zealand Scaup *Aythya novaeseelandiae*).



Juvenile male Hardhead – with its iris beginning to whiten, and its bill now partially bi-coloured.  
Photo by Ray Burton.

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