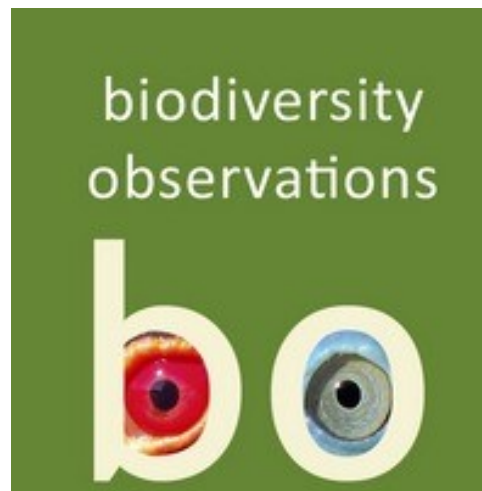


# Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* moulting in the Free State

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## Ornithology

### Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* moulting in the Free State

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#### Abstract

Some Knob-billed Ducks *Sarkidiornis melanotos* in flightless moult were photographed on a farm dam in the central Free State Province of South Africa in May 2019. Although fairly common in the north-eastern quarter of southern Africa, this is apparently only the third record of this species moulting in the sub-region.

The Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* is an irregular visitor or vagrant to the Free State Province of South Africa (Colahan 2005). It was therefore interesting to see an influx of Knob-billed Ducks into the eastern portion of the Free State during the autumn of 2019, possibly in response to good rainfall in the preceding months.

Initially my wife and I encountered a lone female on Loch Lomond, Bethlehem, on 27 April 2019, a first for us in over 20 years of birding in this area. Then on 5 May 2019 we saw a flock of more than 20 birds on Allemanskraal Dam, in Willem Pretorius Game Reserve (Figure 1).

Ten days later (14 May 2019), while traveling from Bethlehem to Bloemfontein, I noticed a small dam next to the N1 about 10 km north-east of the Verkeerdevlei Tollgate, at 28° 42' 46.8"S, 26° 45' 03.6"E. The dam was almost fully covered with knotweed (most likely *Persicaria lapathifolia*, but possibly *P. decipiens*); as I drove past at 120 km/h, I saw one bird on the bank which I suspected could be a Knob-billed Duck. I drove on for a few kilometres before I could safely make a U-turn to confirm it. Back at the dam, I noticed that there were other duck species present: White-faced Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna viduata* and Yellow-billed Ducks *Anas undulata*, Red-billed Teal *A. erythrorhyncha*, Cape Shoveler *A. spatula*, South African Shelduck



**Figure 1:** Knob-billed Ducks - Willem Pretorius Game Reserve, 5 May 2019.

*Tadorna cana*, as well as Knob-billed Duck. Several Knob-billed Ducks could be seen moving through the vegetation (the exact number could not be confirmed due to the dense foliage), with some actively feeding by continuously jumping up and pecking at the tops of the knotweed (Figure 2). Knotweed produces a seed and I assume that this is what the ducks were eating.

I took a couple of quick record photos from inside the car, with trucks thundering past centimetres away! It was only later, when reviewing the photographs at home, I realised that at least some of the birds in this group were in a flightless moult stage (Figures 3 and 4).

It intrigued me as to why they would select this spot to moult so I contacted Brian Colahan, former ornithologist with the Free State Provincial Government; he replied that that he had only one previous record of moult for this species in the Free State, at Koppies Dam in May 1993.



**Figure 2:** Knotweed-covered dam with Knob-billed Duck.



**Figure 3:** Knob-billed duck in flightless moult - series of same individual 1, which has lost all its flight feathers and is growing new ones.

While still able to fly from the dam, these birds fed on groundnuts and sunflower seeds being cultivated on the surrounding farmland.

Most of the breeding (egg-laying) in the north-eastern core of their range in southern Africa is from December to February and there is post-breeding dispersal northwards, eastwards, and southwards from there in extensive, poorly understood movements (Colahan 2005). These birds probably disperse to moult, but Colahan (2005) reports only two records of moulting birds in southern Africa: the Koppies Dam record and a June record from KwaZulu-Natal.

When I travelled to Bloemfontein again on 29 May 2019, the Knob-billed Ducks were still present on the same dam and I saw at least one bird flying, so it seemed as if at least some of them were coming to the end of their moult (if all of them had been moulting). All the

birds that I could see appeared to be in good health and thus getting enough to eat. When passing the site again in mid-June 2019 all the Knob-billed Ducks had left the area.

Other dams in the same area had less vegetation with only small numbers of Red-knobbed Coots *Fulica cristata* and few other waterbirds, which seems to suggest that there was ample food in this specific dam. Because no cultivated fields were within walking distance of the dam, the assumption was that the birds were getting enough food from the vegetation in the dam and that might be the key to their decision to moult there.

## Acknowledgments

My thanks to Brian Colahan for commenting on this note.




**Figure 4:** Knob-billed Duck in flightless moult - series of same individual 2, which is still losing its old flight feathers.

## References

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