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## CONSERVATION REPORT

# Possible breeding of Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* at Muraviovka Park, Far East Russia

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The Critically Endangered Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* (BirdLife International 2013) is one of Asia's most threatened species and could soon be extinct in the wild (Hearn *et al.* 2013). Only three likely breeding sites have been identified since 2010, in Hebei, Henan and Shandong provinces, China (Hearn *et al.* 2013, R. Hearn pers. comm.), some 200–400 km south of Beijing and south of the presumed core breeding range in north-east China and Far East Russia (Brazil 2009). The last known breeding records in Russia are from Khanka lake in Primorye region and there are no recent records from the middle stream of the Amur river. The last published breeding season record from the Amur region was in August 1975—a female collected from Un'ya river on the upper Zeya plain (BirdLife International 2001). Some 30 years ago, in Muraviovka Park, a private nature reserve in the south of the Zeya-Bureya plain 50 km south-east of Blagoveshchensk, Baer's Pochard was recorded as a regular but rare breeding species by Sergei M. Smirenski, now president of the park. Then it inhabited several small well-vegetated lakes, often close to colonies of terns *Chlidonias* sp. (S. M. Smirenski *in litt.*). In the last decade, the species has been recorded only during migration—a single bird each spring in 2009 and 2010 (Stein 2011) and one bird on 12 October 2011 at Kapustikha lake near the park headquarters (WH).

During the 2013 breeding season we searched Muraviovka Park and its surroundings for the species as part of the Amur bird project (Heim & Smirenski 2013). On 18 June 2013 AS and US observed an unusual duck, which could not be identified, hiding in the dense vegetation of a slow-flowing water channel (Plate 1). A record shot of the bird showed several features suggesting it was a Baer's Pochard—a dark brown diving duck with light flanks and round head. No other diving ducks breed in the park, but Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*, Tufted Duck *A. fuligula*, Greater Scaup *A. marila* and Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* have been recorded during migration in May, September and October. This location was searched regularly in the following weeks, and on 9 July KW and WH had good views of a female Baer's Pochard only 100 m from the original sighting. The bird showed the species's typical features: round head, relatively long bill and short tail; head and neck were dark brown as the back, contrasting with the flanks, which were warmer brown with some white areas, the breast was warm chestnut-brown and there was warm brown feathering at the base of the dark grey bill. The eye was brown. The tail was always held low so the colour of the undertail-coverts was not visible. The bird was diving close to some reed stands and record shots (Plate 2) were taken before it flew 100 m north along the channel,

**Plate 1.** The water channel where the first probable Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri* was observed on 18 June 2013.



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**Plate 2.** Record shot of the female Baer's Pochard, Muraviovka Park, 9 July 2013.

when the white wing-bar and completely white underwings were conspicuous. On 25 July WH saw a female Baer's Pochard at the same place as on 18 June and again it escaped by flying. After the end of July no further observation was possible because the Amur river flooded the whole area.

The water in the channel where the observations were made flows very slowly from north to south through the park, about 10 km east of the Amur river. The Baer's Pochard was observed in the southern part, near the road between Muraviovka and Korfovo villages; it is easily accessible by car, but hard to overview. The 1–2 m deep channel is well-vegetated, with flooded sedge meadows and *Phragmites australis* stands as well as different floating and aquatic plants. On parts of the floating mat a mixed colony of White-

winged Terns *Chlidonias leucopterus* and Common Terns *Sterna hirundo longipennis* was breeding (Plate 3). Other breeding species included Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*, Falcated Duck *A. falcata*, Mallard *A. platyrhynchos*, Garganey *A. querquedula*, White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*, Band-bellied Crake *Porzana paykullii*, Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus*, Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Von Schrenck's Bittern *Ixobrychus eurythmus*. The site is legally protected, lying within both the private Muraviovka Park and the state-managed Muraviovka *zakaznik*, but poaching occurs regularly. Duck hunting is a common practice in the region, mainly in spring and autumn.

Since probably the same female Baer's Pochard was seen in the same place for some weeks during the presumed breeding season, it is possible that it

**Plate 3.** Tern colony where the Baer's Pochard was observed, July 2013.

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had a nest there or was at least holding a territory. Terns and cranes in this area lost their nests due to rapidly rising water levels in May and again in July—the Baer's Pochard, if it had a nest, may have suffered the same fate. In 2013 water levels were much higher than in the past 30 years, and there were no spring fires, which regularly destroy all the reed stands. This resulted in there being a huge area of potential breeding habitat that was hard to observe and it is possible that Baer's Pochard was overlooked at other places in the vicinity. This area should be carefully observed as a priority during upcoming breeding seasons to fully evaluate the status of Baer's Pochard in the wetlands around the middle stream of the Amur river – which could be one of the very last breeding sites for this Critically Endangered species.

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