

**FIRST MODERN DOCUMENTATION OF SOUTHERN
POCHARD *Netta erythrophthalma* (ANATIDAE) IN ECUADOR**

**Primera documentación moderna del
Porrón Sureño *Netta erythrophthalma*
(Anatidae) en Ecuador**

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Abstract

We report a female Southern Pochard *Netta erythrophthalma* observed in La Tola, Esmeraldas province, Ecuador, from 19–21 March 2021. This represents the first documented record in the country since 1956. It was observed in a complex of shrimp ponds, where it associated with other waterfowl and foraged actively by diving. Identification was straightforward, excluding potentially confusing species like female Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*. Comparative analysis suggests that it most likely involved the same individual that was recorded in southwestern Colombia in early 2020. The species is now extremely rare in Ecuador, classified as Critically Endangered. It seems extinct as resident and likely occurs only as a vagrant from eastern South America.

Key words

Southern Pochard, waterfowl, extirpated species, Ecuador, Anatidae, Anseriformes.

Resumen

Se reporta la presencia de una hembra de Porrón Sureño *Netta erythrophthalma* en La Tola, provincia de Esmeraldas, Ecuador, en 19–21 de marzo de 2021. Este es el primer registro documentado de esta especie en Ecuador desde 1956. El ave fue observada en un complejo de piscinas camaroneras, donde mostró comportamiento gregario, alimentándose mediante inmersiones y asociándose con bandadas de otras especies acuáticas. La identificación fue relativamente sencilla, y se comparó con especies similares como la hembra del Porrón Piquianillado *Aythya collaris*. Un análisis fotográfico sugiere que se trata del mismo individuo observado previamente en enero-febrero de 2020 en el departamento de Nariño, suroeste de Colombia. *Netta erythrophthalma* es actualmente extremadamente raro en Ecuador, considerado como En Peligro Crítico, y donde al parecer ha desaparecido como residente. Se presume que solo ocurre como errante ocasional desde poblaciones del este de Sudamérica.

Palabras clave

Porrón Sureño, aves acuáticas, especie extirpada, Ecuador, Anatidae, Anseriformes.

The nominate subspecies of Southern Pochard *Netta erythrophthalma erythrophthalma* is a rare duck with a localised distribution in South America. A comprehensive overview of records and population status of *Netta e. erythrophthalma* was given in Freile *et al.* (2016). These authors suggest that since the 1970s, it has experienced a significant decline, especially in the Andes, Caribbean coast and Pacific lowlands, and seemingly the species has vanished from Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. At present, records are continuing in some parts of eastern Brazil and very locally in northwest Venezuela (eBird, 2025).

Hence, we present a detailed report of a female *N. erythrophthalma* that was observed at La Tola, Esmeraldas province, Ecuador, from 19–21 March 2021. The bird was discovered in a shrimp pond complex operated by Purocongo S. A., where it remained under daily observation for 3 consecutive days. Notably, three of the shallow ponds in the complex supported substantial avian activity, including high concentrations of shorebirds and waterfowl.

The female *N. erythrophthalma* exhibited gregarious behavior, and was noted to move between these more populated ponds over the course of its stay. It was often seen joining flocks of predominantly Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors* and White-cheeked Pintail *Anas bahamensis*, but was on one occasion closely associating with a vagrant drake Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*. Her observed behavior included extended periods of resting, sleeping, and preening along the shallow margins of the ponds. During foraging bouts, it engaged in active diving, particularly in deeper pond sections. Follow-up searches and visits to the site by other observers on 22 and 29 March failed to relocate the bird, suggesting that it had departed the immediate area (J. Nilsson *pers. comm.*, March 2021).

Description and identification

The bird was a medium-sized duck, resembling *Aythya* diving ducks in both shape and general appearance. It showed a fairly long neck, with a steep forehead and a subtly peaked hindcrown. The bill was long and dark greyish, with a noticeably drooping nail, and the feet were blackish-grey. A distinctive facial pattern was evident, consisting of a diffuse white crescent starting behind the eye, extending downward and broadening along the neck and throat, where it connected with paler white markings surrounding the base of the bill. An indistinct white eye-ring was present, and the irides were a dark reddish-brown. The body plumage was mostly a uniform warm brown, with moderate mottling on the underparts, and slightly darker sooty-brown wings. The undertail coverts were subtly mottled with some white. In flight, the bird displayed a distinct and clean white wing-bar extending from the secondaries to the primaries (Madge & Burn, 1992; Ridgely & Greenfield, 2001).

Identification was relatively straightforward. The most similar species recorded in Ecuador (Freile *et al.*, 2013) is the female Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris* (Madge & Burn, 1992). Compared to *N. erythrophthalma*, *A. collaris* is slightly more compact and stockier, and shows a prominent white band near the bill tip; it also lacks the extensive facial crescent of the female *N. erythrophthalma*. Additionally, in flight, the grey wing-bars of *A. collaris* females are less evident (Madge & Burn, 1992). Furthermore, a female Rosy-billed Pochard *Netta peposaca*, a potential vagrant from the Southern Cone, may also appear similar but lacks the facial markings of *N. erythrophthalma* and shows a distinctly demarcated white vent (Madge & Burn, 1992). The relatively diffuse facial pattern and absence of clearly defined white undertail coverts in our bird may suggest it involved an immature. Our record has been accepted by the Committee for Ecuadorian Records in Ornithology (Sánchez-Nivicela *et al.*, 2023).



Figure 1: Southern Pochard *Netta erythrophthalma* at Purocongo shrimp ponds, La Tola, Esmeraldas province, Ecuador, 20 March 2021: (A) resting in shallow water, facing left; (B) swimming in a flock with Blue-winged Teal *Spatula discors* and White-cheeked Pintail *Anas bahamensis*; (C) closely associating with a Lesser Scaup *Aythya affinis*; (D) in flight with *S. discors*, showing its evident white wing-bars (Dušan M. Brinkhuizen).

A recent record from southwestern Colombia

From 7 January to at least 22 February 2020, a female *N. erythrophthalma* was observed at Finca Maragrícola, department of Nariño, southwestern Colombia (Lenz *et al.*, 2020). This locality lies approximately 62 km north from Purocongo shrimp ponds. A careful comparison of photographs suggests that the facial pattern of the Colombian individual is identical to that of the bird seen at La Tola. We therefore consider it highly likely that both records refer to the same individual. While it is rare for a vagrant to be independently documented in two different countries, the extreme rarity of the species in the region supports the likelihood that a single wandering bird accounts for both sightings.

Status in Ecuador

Netta erythrophthalma is nowadays extremely rare in Ecuador (eBird, 2025). Historically, the species was reportedly observed in numbers—sometimes described as occurring in the “hundreds” (Ridgely & Greenfield, 2001)—but in recent decades it has mysteriously vanished from Ecuadorian wetlands. Documented records from Ecuador consist of specimens collected in the early 20th century, with the last known specimen being a male collected near Ancón, Santa Elena province, in July 1956 (Marchant, 1958; Ridgely & Greenfield, 2001). The most recent undocumented sight record was at La Segua marshes, Manabí province, in February 2007, when four individuals were reported (Santander & Lara, 2008; Freile *et al.*, 2013).

The nominate subspecies of *N. erythrophthalma* appears to be undergoing a significant decline across much of South America (Freile *et al.*, 2016). In Ecuador, the species has almost certainly disappeared as resident and now likely occurs only as a very rare vagrant, most probably as a result of sporadic dispersal from eastern South American populations. The precise origin of our female remains speculation; however, it may have originated from its primary stronghold in eastern Brazil or alternatively from northwestern Venezuela. Of particular note, there has been an apparent increase in reports from Venezuela since 2022, especially in the vicinity of Barquisimeto, Lara state, where flocks of up to eight individuals have been reported between January and July (eBird, 2025). The importance of continued monitoring and documenting of *N. erythrophthalma* in South America is essential for assessing its conservation status and elucidating potential patterns of seasonal movements or vagrancy. Given the species’ dramatic regional decline, we concur with a classification as Critically Endangered in Ecuador and adjacent countries (Ridgely & Greenfield, 2001; Freile *et al.*, 2016; Freile *et al.*, 2019).

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