**Anas acuta** (Northern Pintail)

Family: Anatidae (Ducks and Geese)
Order: Anseriformes (Waterfowl)
Class: Aves (Birds)

![Fig. 1. Northern pintail, Anas acuta.](http://www.arkive.org/northern-pintail/anas-acuta/, downloaded 6 February 2017)

**TRAITS.** *Anas acuta* is a medium-sized duck with a small head, pointy tail and long neck, and a wingspan of 80-95cm (Del Hoyo, 1992). The males have a length of 57-76cm and they weigh 450-1360g while the females have a length of 51-64cm and weigh 454-1135g. These birds are sexually dimorphic (Fig. 1). In the males, the head and part of the neck are dark brown. A white stripe runs from the back of their ear to the sides of their neck. Their lower and under neck are also white. However their upper back and sides are grey. Their scapulars and tertials are narrow, long and black with white edges while their bills are bluish grey. The scapulars are feathers that are located on the shoulder while the tertials are the inner feathers of the wing (Bond, 1974). The females are mottled brown with a uniformly grey-brown head. Their tails are shorter and not as pointed as the males’ while their bills are dark grey. Both sexes have legs and feet that are bluish grey (Madge, 1988).

**DISTRIBUTION.** *Anas acuta* is a migratory bird that is distributed throughout the world (Fig. 2). They are widespread over Europe, North America and Asia. In summer they are distributed in the Northern Hemisphere while in winter they move to the Southern Hemisphere. *Anas acuta* is a rare visitor to Trinidad (Bond, 1974).
HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. *Anas acuta* lives in terrestrial, marine and freshwater environments. They are found in tundra or prairies that have freshwater, low grasslands that are open, floodplains, sewage ponds, rivers, fresh water and saline marshes, wet meadows and ponds that have dense low vegetation. In winter season they are found in inland lakes, coastal lagoons, river deltas, marshes and estuaries. These ducks are nocturnal feeders (IUCN, 2017).

FOOD AND FEEDING. *Anas acuta* is omnivorous (IUCN, 2017). Their diet consists of rice, oats, wheat, barley, algae, seeds, weeds, grass, insects, amphibians, small fish, worms, molluscs and crustaceans (Bellrose, 1980). Diet is dependent on food availability and their stage in the breeding cycle. During egg formation the females consume more invertebrates as these contain a higher source of protein. However after laying the consumption of seeds is higher because these are high energy sources. Females are more frequent eaters than the males when pre-nesting and laying. During the moult period these ducks consume less food (Krapu, 1974). Foraging occurs singly, in pairs or in flocks at night (Miller, 1983). *Anas acuta* feeds by filter-feeding dabbling, grazing the ground, swimming and tipping up or diving in water. While feeding in water they display a behaviour known as upending (Fig. 3). This is where the head and foreparts are submerged in water while the rest of the body is above the water surface (Gooders and Boyer, 1997).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. *Anas acuta* is gregarious when not breeding. They form small groups or large flocks. These flocks are usually mixed with other duck species (Madge, 1988). Large flocks are formed during moulting, migration and winter (Derrickson, 1977).

REPRODUCTION. Sexual maturity of these ducks occurs at one year old. The breeding season is in spring and summer. The female lays approximately 7-9 eggs in May. The eggs are elliptical shaped, cream in colour and weigh approximately 45g (Fig. 4). The female (alone) incubates the eggs for 22-24 days. The eggs are hatched 24 hours apart with no assistance from the mother. The young are precocial (Bellrose, 1980). When they hatch, the mother leads them to the nearest water body where they hunt small insects. The mother attends to the ducklings for 4-6 weeks after hatching until they are fledged or capable of flight (Robinson, 2002).

BEHAVIOUR. Juvenile behaviour. Juveniles resemble the female but their plumage is duller. They feed mostly on invertebrates. Hours after hatching they are able to walk, run and feed themselves (Sowls, 1955). They give gave a “peep” call when contented however in distress they give off repeated loud “peeps” (Derrickson, 1977).

Anti-predator behaviour: Some of the common predators of this duck are magpies, crows, gulls, bobcats, badgers and foxes. Nesting ducks and ducklings are more vulnerable to predators. The adults are able to escape by flight or feigning death however the nesting females are unable to escape (Derrickson, 1977). The mother protects the brood from intruders by performing distraction behaviour like quacking, circling the intruder, standing alert and splashing water (Sowls, 1955).

Communication: Various courtship rituals are displayed by *Anas acuta*. The male courts the female by whistling and lowering his head. He then swims close to her with his tail erect. If there are other ducks courting the same female the male will then pursue her via flight. Copulation occurs in the water. The female positions her body in a lowered angle whereby the
male mounts her. During mating the male grips the feathers from the back of the female’s neck in his mouth (Fig. 5). When the act of mating is completed the male raises his head back and whistles (Robinson, 2002). Sexual selection is displayed by females as they prefer males with colourful scapulars and pure white breasts (Madge, 1988).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. Anas acuta is affected by loss of wetland habitat, recreational hunting and is a victim of trade. In Europe it is protected under CMS in Appendix II and its IUCN Conservation Status is Least Concern due to its wide distribution. Although the population is facing a decline it is not rapid enough to approach the vulnerable threshold (IUCN, 2017).

REFERENCES

Author: Hannah Cozier
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Fig. 2. Geographic distribution of *Anas acuta*.

Fig. 3. Male *Anas acuta* upending.
**Fig. 4.** Nest and eggs of *Anas acuta.*
[http://davidstimac.photoshelter.com/image/I0000I94x_YdpCxe, downloaded 24 February 2017]

**Fig. 5.** Male and female *Anas acuta* mating.
[https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2015/04/30/readers-wildlife-photographs-106/, downloaded 23 February 2017]

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