

Discovery of a pair of Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* specimens from the C.M. Inglis collection at the Zoological Section, Government Museum, Chennai and their provenance

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The Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* is officially listed by the IUCN Red List as Critically Endangered, though it is likely extinct. While Salim Ali estimated around 80 museum specimens worldwide (Ali 1960a; b), the actual total may be higher as collections continue to be actively documented and updated (Krishnan 2022). We report here the identification and provenance of a matched pair (male and female) of Pink-headed Ducks currently housed at the Zoological Section, Government Museum, Chennai [1, 2]. These specimens were part of a 1954 acquisition of 60 bird skins and 190 eggs comprising 35 different species of Indian birds donated by Sybil D. Inglis, Kenilworth, Coonoor from her late husband C. M. Inglis' ornithological collections (Aiyappan 1955:4; Museum accession records). Although the presence of these specimens in the bird galleries was briefly noted in institutional guidebooks (Satyamurti 1970), a detailed appraisal of their provenance was pending, and their existence was therefore not widely known (Krishnan 2022; Praveen 2025). Most skins and egg specimens of the Inglis collection were donated or gifted by S. D. Inglis to this museum for the assistance provided by S. T. Satyamurti, the then Curator, Zoology Section (C.Z.S.) in packing and listing bird skins. However, the Pink-headed Duck specimen pair was specifically purchased and accessioned together on 14 September 1954 as a single historic batch entry (Museum Catalogue Number: MAD #364/1954; here designated individually as MAD #364/01/1954 for the male and MAD #364/02/1954 for the female; Locality: Baghownie [=Baghauni], Darbhanga district, North Bihar) as study skins for INR150/- (Aiyappan 1955; Museum accession records). It was later mounted for display, each on an individual wooden base [1, 2]. A recent archival search uncovered an original, handwritten receipt signed by S.D. Inglis acknowledging ₹150 for 'the pair of Pink-Headed ducks', the exact transcript of which is provided. Certain letters in parentheses are unclear or hidden in the original document¹.

14.10.1954

Dear D. aiyappan,

Very many thanks for your cheque for Rs.150/- for the (P/p)air of Pink-Headed Ducks, I (e)nclose stamped receipt.

I have sent a parcel (o)f books by SRVS and hope (t)hey will be a useful addition (...) your library, I enclose their (re)ceipt.

Yours sincerely

Sybil D. Inglis



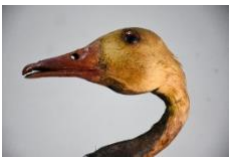
[1] Pink-headed Duck male specimen MAD #364/01/1954. All photos: Department photographer, Government Museum, Chennai

¹ Originals not reproduced here as we do not have the required permissions for the same.



[2] Pink-headed Duck female MAD #364/02/1954

The male specimen exhibits a diagnostic dark brown strip on the fore-neck, extending from the breast towards the throat, a feature consistent with literature (Stuart Baker 1908). The head and neck plumage show significant post-mortem fading. The bill shows evidence of historical pigment restoration. The feet and tarsi exhibit characteristic post-mortem darkening, appearing as a dull, dark brown colour [3]. The female specimen has muted, brownish-pink head plumage and a deep chocolate-brown body. Like the male, the soft parts show typical taxidermy degradation and darkening. In both specimens, the maxilla and mandible exhibit an opaque surface finish and evidence of brushwork, suggesting restoration attempts with pigment to simulate the species' life-like pink bill coloration [3, 4]. No measurements were taken to avoid compromising the condition of the specimens.



[3] Close-up of the head region of male (MAD #364/01/1954) showing the prominent brown band along the fore-neck. Note the evidence of restoration on the bill, apparently intended to reproduce the lost pink hue.



[4] Close-up of the head region of female (MAD #364/02/1954) lacking the prominent brown band along the fore-neck.

The wooden bases also feature the scientific name "*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*", followed by the common name as the "pink headed duck" with the relevant sex symbols inscribed in black ink. Additionally, faint pencil notations are present, including the number that appears to read "498" on the wooden base supporting the male specimen and a cursive scribble likely reading "Ditto" or "Diton" on the wooden base of the female specimen [5, 6]. Without additional context, we were unable to decipher what these markings meant, but ongoing audit might reveal potential clues.



[5] Faint pencil markings on the wooden base. A closer examination reveals the text likely suggests a number like '498' on the wooden base of male specimen (indicated by red arrow)



[6] Faint pencil markings on the wooden base. A closer examination reveals the text that appears to read 'Ditto' or 'Diton' on the wooden base of the female specimen (indicated by arrow)

While earnest attempts were made to track the original field tags to determine the exact date of collection, they were likely lost during the mounting and taxidermy process in 1954. Although the ducks came from the Inglis collection, this does not, by itself, establish who shot them. Inglis (1940) stated that he obtained eight specimens (five males and three females) from 1903. Of these, the only pair collected by him was collected on 07 April 1923, which also happens to be the most recent specimen of a wild bird, a female housed in Yale Peabody Museum (YPM), USA (Ali 1960a). However, the provenance of that material has been questioned in the past (BirdLife International 2001; Hume 2018). Since the Chennai Museum birds were believed to comprise a pair, and the only known pair till date was possibly in YPM, we obtained the labels of

the latter (YPM ORN #042022–23) from the YPM collections manager with the help of the editor (Reproduced with permission from Kristof Zyskowski). These tags [7, 8], both in Inglis's hand, clearly demonstrate that the YPM specimens are indeed the well-known last pair collected by Inglis on 07 April 1923. However, one specimen (#042022) also bears a BNHS tag, which may indicate its route into the YPM collection. The specimen may have been exchanged or purchased by the YPM in the 1950s as the specimen is absent from the catalogues (Ali 1960a; Abdulali 1968).

What about the second pair we discovered? To resolve this ambiguity, we attempted to trace the current whereabouts of all Inglis specimens of the Pink-headed Duck, as a chronological exclusion matrix (Table 1), using published museum catalogues, literature, and online catalogues in Global Biodiversity Information Facility (www.gbif.org).



[7] Labels of YPM ORN #42022, a male Pink-headed Duck specimen by Inglis taken on '7.4.1923'. Photo: Kristof Zyskowski



[8] Labels of YPM ORN #42023, a female Pink-headed Duck specimen collected by Inglis on the same date as [7]. Photo: Kristof Zyskowski

Sl. No.	Sex	Date	Locality	Remarks by C.M. Inglis	Contextual relevance to the Chennai Museum pair	Museum holding	References
1	Male	09 August 1903	Benoa Chauar	Brought in by local collector/mirshikar. Bird was in poor health and was killed	Different locality and isolated drake	Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai (BNHS #20118). Logged under "Darbhanga"	(Inglis 1903; Abdulali 1968; Hume 2018; Praveen J. pers. comm. September 2026)
2	Male	26 June 1905	Benoa Chauar	Kept in captivity in his aviary for some time	Different locality and isolated drake	Natural History Museum, London NHMUK #1949.WHL.1.6168 with date of collection recorded as 11 July 1905 - C. M. Inglis (H. Whistler)	(Inglis 1904; Hume 2018)
3	Female	02 September 1906	Near Baghownie	No specific remarks given	Same locality but isolated duck	Untraced	
4	Female	23 July 1910	Near Baghownie	Brought in by local collector/mirshikar with an egg laid in basket. Kept in captivity but no further eggs laid	Same locality but isolated duck	Natural History Museum, Tring NHMUK #1949.WHL.1.6167 with date of collection recorded as 23 rd August 1910 – C. M. Inglis (H. Whistler). The egg associated with this collection is probably at the Finnish Museum of Natural History (GBC.44328#P1).	(Hume 2018)
5	Male	25 July 1910	Near Baghownie	In breeding plumage	Same locality but a specific morphological feature explicitly mentioned	State Museum of Natural History, Stockholm, Sweden. NRM #572041	(Ali 1960a)

6 and 7	A pair	07 April 1923	Simarda, Near Baghownie	"This pair was shot in a small piece of water in company with Whistling Teal. They had fed on small shell fish and a small crab."	Same locality (Baghownie) and explicitly recorded as a pair.	Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, USA as YPM ORN #42022 and #42023.	(Ali 1960a; BirdLife International 2001; Hume 2018; This work)
8	Male	21 June 1935	Near Baghownie	No specific remarks given	No bird skin exists today. But Inglis included it alongside other specimens he obtained, and is clearly one of his '8 specimens' he obtained since 1903.	Last accepted wild bird. However, some recent works states this specimen has not been preserved.	(Ali 1960a; Hume 2018; Krishnan 2022)

As evident, there are no other Pink-headed Duck pairs in any of the well-known collections. In fact, six of the eight Inglis specimens have unambiguous traceability to a specific world museum. A female (Sl. No. #3 in Table 1) is the only female specimen that remains to be traced. The only male specimen that remains to be traced is the last one in the list, from 1935. It has also been reported as the last reliable 'sight record' (Ali 1960a), which implies that Inglis himself saw the bird. However, later workers have explicitly stated that this male was 'trapped' and 'the specimen was not preserved' (Hume 2018). However, we are unable to trace the source of this information as neither Inglis's his hand-written notes (Inglis Undated) nor his published paper (Inglis 1940) mention it. In Inglis's undated notes, we find that the latest recorded date in one of the entries (Entry #339) was June 1945 in his extensive list of birds (Inglis Undated). Since Inglis passed away in February 1954, the notes must have been drafted by him either during the year 1945 or later but before 1954, which narrows down the timeline of this undated work between 1945 and 1954. Further, based on a correspondence dated 19 November 1954 from Jamal Ara to Raichowdhury, the then Special Officer, Gazetteer Revision Section, Revenue Department, Bihar, Patna, it can be verified that Jamal Ara received these comprehensive notes directly from Inglis for compiling a checklist of the birds of Bihar (Ara 1954). Given Inglis's meticulous nature, and the extreme rarity and significance of the Pink-headed Duck, it is highly unlikely he would have omitted or avoided documenting a separate, unrecorded pair, if any in his collection. Any new details concerning such rare ducks should have found mention in that latest work by Inglis, even if these were collected by any other sportsmen or collector.

Although, the precise collection dates for the Chennai specimens remain unknown, the fact they were collected from Baghownie cannot be doubted. However, the birds may not have been procured on the same day as there is no explicit indication of that by either C. M. Inglis or his wife S. D. Inglis. Inglis (1940, Undated) does mention others collecting Pink-headed Ducks, and presumably he had some of them. However, none of them are from Baghownie. In summary, two birds shot from Baghownie by Inglis, on two different dates, a male and a female, are missing in the world museums and there is no record of anybody else being involved in a Pink-headed Duck collection from Baghownie.

We strongly suspect that the female (MAD #364/02/1954) in Chennai Museum is the yet-untraced female shot by Inglis on 02 September 1906 (Sl. No. #3). However, the greatest interest would be that the male (MAD #364/01/1954) in the Chennai collection must certainly be the one Inglis collected on 21 June 1935, the last wild caught bird. This would complete the traceability of every Inglis specimen of the Pink-headed Duck. While these assertions cannot be unambiguously proven without the actual specimen tags, circumstances offer no other alternative explanations to their origins. Exactly two specimens from a collector's set are missing, and they happens to be a male and a female, and the ones in the museum obtained from the same collector are also matching sex for sex, and their locality tag matches completely with the missing ones.

The Government Museum Chennai welcomes collaborative research and the requests should be directed through the Director, Department of Museums, Government of Tamil Nadu. At this point in time, scientific investigations are limited to non-invasive methodologies—such as photography, videography, or advanced diagnostic scanning (X-ray/micro-CT)—conducted within formal frameworks where the Zoology Section acts as the principal investigating unit.

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