

Pink-eared Duck

(*Malacorhynchus membrabaceus*)



The pink “ear” of a Pink-eared Duck refers to the small triangle of pink feathers behind their black eye patches. These have nothing to do with the real ears, which are lower down and covered with feathers. The pink ear is also not a good identifying feature because of its small size and tendency to be invisible in poor light. A better name would be “Zebra Duck” because of the bold black-and-white vertical stripes, or perhaps, “Flute Bill” referencing its peculiar membranous bill, or even, “Clown Duck” by virtue of its dark eye patches



The large grey bill with a membranous flap in the front form a “scoop” that is unique and easily visible in the field. This is used to collect the plank-tonic organisms (algae, seeds, crustaceans, molluscs, and insects) on which the bird feeds, either from the surface, or from muddy bottoms. Look for pairs circling around each other at speed. The vortex created by this manoeuvre raises columns of material from the bottom from which prey may be more easily collected. In South Australia mainly breeds August to February but much depends on water levels. They are monogamous and their pair-bonds are probably long-term.

Description

The face is off-white becoming grey on the forehead and crown. The eyes have a narrow whitish ring within large dark eyepatches that unite with a black stripe down the nape and hind neck with the pink “ear” tucked in between them. The underparts are white with bold, black vertical stripes. On the flank near the tail there is a noticeable white marker. The undertail is ochre. The back and wings are brown with a white rump. The underwings are white and there is a white trailing edge to the upper wings and tail. Both sexes are alike. Juveniles are duller and browner with the pink “ear” being virtually non-existent