



## As It Happens

with Carol Off and Jeff Douglas

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# Why this British man has dedicated his life to searching for the elusive pink-headed duck

### Story transcript

Twenty years ago, British shop-keeper Richard Thorns became obsessed with a duck. Not just any duck: a pink-headed one.

The obsession is all about seeing the duck in the wild. The only problem is that the last documented spotting of the species was in 1949 in India.

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That hasn't stopped Thorns. He's already mounted six expeditions to the wilds of Myanmar, all unsuccessful, but he's once again returned to the country's northern wetlands.

*'A chap today said in the books they say it's not very pretty. But he said in the flesh, it's beautiful.'*

- Richard Thorns, pink-headed duck superfan

He spoke to *As it Happens* guest host Helen Mann from Kachin state, near Indawgyi Lake where the search is focussed. Here is what he had to say about his [seventh](#) expedition.

### Any sign of this pink-headed duck yet?

There was some interesting news that we had. We went to a village yesterday, and a villager said that he was walking to work one morning — next to the wetland — and he startled a large number of gadwall. And in it was a bird with a bright pink head.

And he thought, "Oh, that's a strange looking bird". This happened some 19 years ago. So tomorrow we're taking the elephants in, and we're going to be doing what the Victorians did 150 years ago — we're going to try to flush the cripper out.

**Now you say a bright pink head, but can you give us a bit of a better sense of what one of these birds looks like?**

It's quite a large duck. It's about the size of a mallard, chocolate-brown or black plumage. But the striking thing about the bird is that it's got a very long, straight neck — almost like a drainpipe, really. It doesn't curve very much. It's been described in the past like a rose-pink.

A chap who told us a story today said in the books they say it's not very pretty. But he said in the flesh, it's beautiful.

### **What is it about the pink-headed duck for you? How did this begin?**

Nearly 20 years ago I was a shop assistant in Tunbridge Wells in Kent in southern England, and I didn't really have an awful lot going on in my life. And I went up to the local library on my lunch hour, and I got a book on endangered birds.

And there were three case histories of birds that had already gone. And lo and behold, the third one was India's pink-headed duck.

I'd never heard of a pink-headed duck, and I thought, "Well, it's probably gone for good, and isn't that shame." And then the author said ... "even though it became extinct very recently." That just changed everything for me.

### **I have to ask, what do your family and friends think of this?**

I think if my father were alive, he'd try to really defend me to the hilt, and get annoyed and upset with all the people that collapsed into puddles of laughter, which is sometimes what happens. You get lots of jokes about hoisin sauce and cucumbers. I suppose that's kind of natural, really. If people want to rib me about it, that's fine.

### **You've been focused on this for so long. You have to have thought about what it's going to mean for you if you ever actually see this duck after 20 years. What will that be like for you?**

I don't know how I'm going to feel, to be honest. I think it's going to be a history-changing moment. It really will be. It will be a National Geographic moment. But for me personally, it's why I gave up a halfway decent way of life for. It cost me 20 thousand dollars. I've been bitten by a spider. I've been chased by a water buffalo. I've broken my hand in a road accident. But I just keep coming back for more, because why wouldn't you?

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*This interview has been edited for length and clarity. For more on this story, listen to our conversation with Richard Thorns.*