

Louisiana DUCKS





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Written by
Bill Fontenot
and
Richard DeMay

Photography by
Greg Lavaty

Illustration and Design by
Diane K. Baker

About Ducks

Ducks belong to the waterfowl family Anatidae which also includes swans and geese. Worldwide, this family contains over 150 species arranged into about 45 genera. Here in North America, 50 species occur regularly, with an additional nine species recorded as “accidentals” (non-breeding species which occasionally stray into the continent). Due mainly to their economic importance as game birds, ducks have long been carefully monitored. Since 1955, with the development of modern-day aerial surveying techniques, the North American duck population has been shown to annually fluctuate between 25-50 million individuals. Most recently (2016) our continental duck population is estimated at 48.4 million birds, owing to increased habitat conservation efforts in both breeding and wintering areas. Still, the populations of some species such as Green-winged Teal and the goldeneyes (Common Goldeneye and Barrow’s Goldeneye) have recently experienced declines.

As with all waterbird groups, ducks possess highly specialized bills, feet, and plumages which enable them to live, forage, and breed in a wide variety of open-water and wetland habitats spread across arctic, temperate, and tropical climates. Some species, such as the Wood Duck and the Hooded Merganser are adapted to living in forested wetlands such as swamps and bottomland hardwoods. Others, like the scoters and eiders, live primarily at sea or in marine estuaries. Others, such as the scaup species and Green-winged Teal are more flexible in habitat preferences, living in a diverse array of places

including lakes, ponds, rivers, and marshes as well as marine environments.

Duck bills are prominent and most often flattened to facilitate straining water in order to capture tiny plants, seeds, and invertebrates; but most species are also able to capture small fishes, shellfish, snails, acorns, rootstocks of aquatic plants, and other larger items. To this general food list, many diving ducks also add small clams and mussels whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Duck feet are strongly webbed, enabling them to swim and dive for their food. Duck plumage is underlain with a layer of down feathering in order to insulate their bodies for living on water.

As with the shorebirds (plovers, sandpipers, and allies), most duck species are densely-muscled and swift and powerful fliers. Many of the longer distance migratory species are capable of sustained flights with air speeds averaging 45mph or more. In general, however, most fall-migrating duck species move in shorter distances, stopping whenever and wherever food supplies and open/unfrozen water can be found. As winter wears on, the ducks continue their southerly journeys as dictated by these two factors. Due to their prowess in the air, ducks are able to accomplish daily commutes of a hundred miles or more between roosting and foraging areas in whatever regions they might settle into.

Based on primary modes of foraging, ducks are split into two groups: the “dabblers” and the “divers”. Dabbling ducks typically “tip up” when feeding, with



Northern Pintail

their posteriors remaining above the water while they search the subsurface with outstretched necks for prey items. With diving ducks, the entire body is submersed as the bird swims underwater after its food. These two general modes of feeding have resulted in some primary differences in body shape, neck length, leg placement, and foot structure between the two groups.

Dabblers tend to ride high and buoyant on the water surface, whereas divers exhibit a significantly lower profile. Generally, dabblers possess relatively longer bodies and

longer necks, adapted for stretching down into shallower waters to access food items, whereas divers possess shorter, more compact bodies and necks for easier maneuvering as they swim completely below the water surface. The legs of dabblers are located more toward the center of the body whereas diving duck legs are positioned well back beneath the base of the tail. Unlike the dabbling ducks, the diving ducks also possess a fleshy lobe along the hind toe to facilitate subsurface swimming. Most dabblers are able to walk – even run – on land, whereas most divers, due to

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck



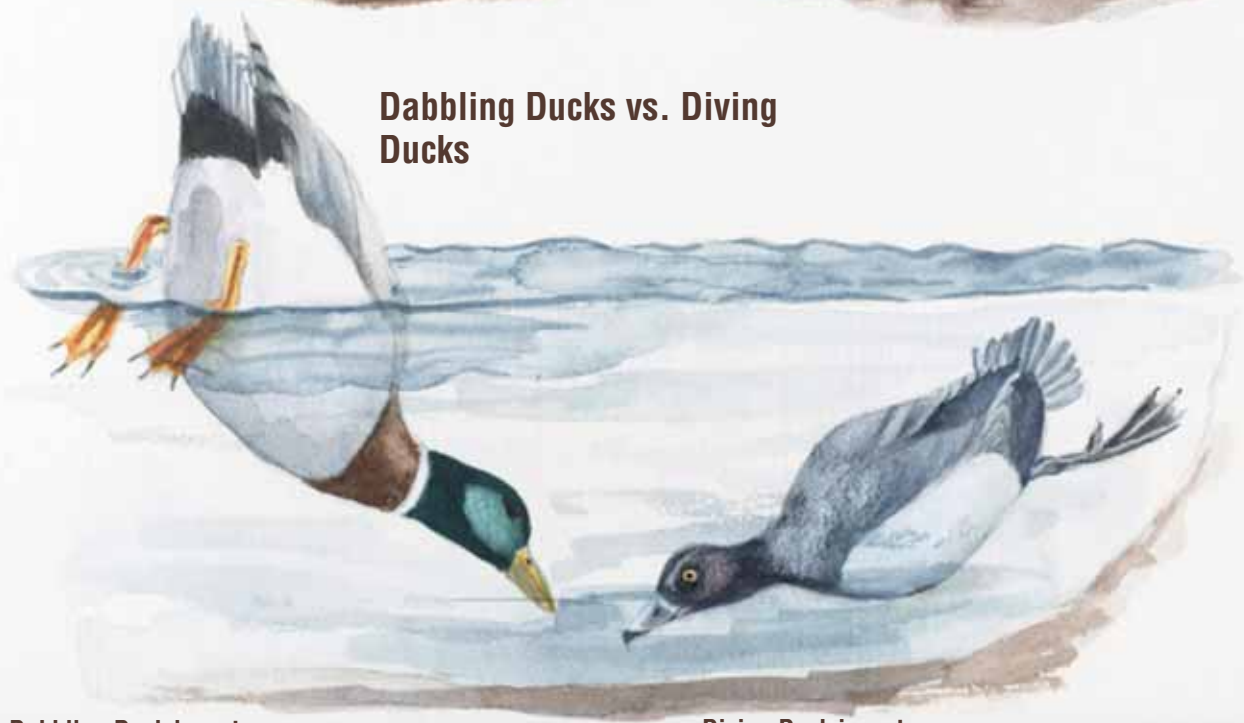
Dabbling Duck on land



Diving Duck on land



Dabbling Ducks vs. Diving Ducks



Dabbling Duck in water

Diving Duck in water

the rearward position of their legs, cannot even stand up. Dabblers are able to launch immediately and directly into the air when taking flight, whereas divers must flap their wings and “run” over the water surface before successfully launching into flight.

Within two particular species groups -- the mergansers and the tree ducks -- these diving vs. dabbling anatomical differences are taken to extremes. Adapted to lives spent chasing fishes underwater, the legs of the mergansers are quite short relative to their respective body sizes. Too, their bills are much narrower than other ducks and edged with

prominent back-slanting fish-holding serrations, resulting in a unique “saw-toothed” appearance. Tree ducks, on the other hand, are so adapted to lives in shallow water and on land that they possess many characters intermediate between dabbling ducks and geese, exhibiting overtly long legs and bodies to go with notably goose-like adaptations in posture, foraging, and flight. So different are these tree duck characters from other ducks that they have been placed in an entirely different subfamily (Dendrocygninae) than all other ducks (Anatinae).



Wood Duck

Louisiana Ducks

Given the plethora of large lakes, swamps, marshes, and rivers, combined with over a million additional acres of rice/crawfish aquaculture fields, prime duck habitat is abundant in Louisiana.

Due to a number of factors – not the least of which is the fact that they have always been considered a plenteous and important food source for local peoples – ducks have been prominently reported throughout Louisiana’s history, from colonial times through the present. From 1718-1734 Franco-Dutch naturalist Antoine Simon Le Page Du Pratz explored much of Louisiana, culminating in the publication of his book, The History of Louisiana (1758) in France. In it, he is quick to mention that “Wild Ducks are fatter, more delicate, and of better taste than those in France,” and concluding “for one you see in France you may here count a thousand.” He comments on a number of duck species, reserving his highest praise for the Wood Duck, known then as the “Perching Duck” or the “Carolina Summer Duck,” mentioning “Their plumage is quite beautiful, and so changeable that no painting can imitate it.”

A century or so later, John James Audubon would produce a Wood Duck painting in Louisiana which even Le Page himself would applaud. Ducks were among the first birds that Audubon reported on his arrival to Louisiana on New Year’s Day 1821. As the keelboat *Columbus* eased into the tiny Mississippi River port of Bayou Sara at noon that day, he wrote, “Many Irish Geese [Double-crested Cormorant] in the Eddys – Malards, but few Geese...”

One week later he would finally arrive in New Orleans. During his long stay there he commonly reported on wild birds he found for sale at the [French] Market; and among these – especially during the winter months – ducks were among the most commonly reported.



Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, market hunting was outlawed and sport hunting was on the rise, especially for waterfowl. From the advent of this fledgling sport-hunting industry, the monitoring of North America's duck population had become serious business. During this period, duck banding had become the primary means to decipher where the birds were breeding, where they were wintering, and the continental routes which they were using to travel in between. Louisiana naturalist E. A. McIlhenny had been hunting the marshes of the coastal zone since he was a boy in the latter half of the 19th century, and by 1912 had begun banding ducks in Iberia and Vermilion parishes. In a report published in 1934, he detailed 21 years of duck banding experiments, during which time he had banded 21,996 individuals representing 15 duck species.



Map depicting McIlhenny's duck Banding returns

Prior to McIlhenny's work, it was assumed that migratory ducks followed a rather straight north-south pathway between their nesting and wintering areas; but as the above map depicts, banding returns from his operations came from 34 states, 10 Canadian and 4 Mexican provinces, as well as Guatemala in Central America. Duck biologists also learned of a few longevity records from McIlhenny's bands, including that of a female Lesser Scaup that he had banded at Avery Island

on 29 December 1922 and was recovered at Clearwater, Manitoba in the fall of 1932.

The biggest leap in waterfowl censusing came just after WWII when biologists who had become pilots in the service realized that airborne monitoring would be the most efficient and accurate method of keeping tabs on waterfowl. The Flyway System devised by these biologists is still in use today. The system split the continent into four separate flyways, each of which would develop its own censusing, monitoring, and management planning protocols. Biologists working the flyways by air would become known as Flyway Biologists.

One of the earliest Flyway Biologists, John J. "Johnny" Lynch, was working out of Lafayette, Louisiana. Prior to the war he had been working as a Junior Biologist with the Division of Wildlife Research at the Bureau of Biological Survey (a predecessor to today's U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service), investigating waterfowl foraging and food items at the Delta Migratory Waterfowl Refuge down near the mouth of the Mississippi River. After the war he joined other Flyway Biologists in pioneering aerial waterfowl survey techniques, as well as winter habitat management studies here in Louisiana. Among his many accomplishments, Johnny Lynch is said to have been among the first of the Flyway Biologists to point out the prairie pothole region of the Northern Plains as the most crucially-important breeding area in the North American continent.

Originally from New England, Lynch would spend the better part of five decades in coastal Louisiana – primarily in the marsh belt – studying winter habitat requirements for many species of ducks, and becoming an expert in aerial waterfowl survey techniques and Snow Goose biology along the way. During his many days in the marshes Lynch became friendly with some of Louisiana's most interesting characters: trappers, fishermen, boatmen, and ex-market hunters who had become duck hunting guides, most of whom spoke Cajun/Creole French as a first language. Many of the Louisiana French names for the duck species covered in this publication come from a report prepared by Lynch in 1942 entitled Local Bird Names from Louisiana and East Texas.

From the mid-1950s through the present, Louisiana waterfowl have been aerially surveyed on multiple occasions each year, usually within the months of November, December, and January. For many years, Louisiana's winter duck population has averaged around 2.7 million birds. Most recently (December 2016) however, the state's total has climbed to around 3.6 million birds, reflecting a similar uptick in North America's total duck population (48.4 million in July 2016 vs. long-term average of 20.9 million). Both continental and regional duck population estimates are known to fluctuate dramatically from year to year, but this most recent uptick has captured the optimism of waterfowl biologists and duck conservation organizations which have been working hard over the past few decades to acquire, conserve, and restore both breeding and wintering waterfowl habitats throughout the U.S. and Canada.

To date, 31 species of ducks have been recorded in Louisiana. Of these, only six species actually nest in Louisiana: Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Fulvous

Whistling Duck, Mottled Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Wood Duck, and Hooded Merganser. Fifteen additional species routinely overwinter here: Gadwall, American Wigeon, Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, and Ruddy Duck. An additional 10 species occur on a rare, irregular, or occasional basis: Eurasian Wigeon, American Black Duck, Cinnamon Teal, King Eider, Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Common Merganser, and Masked Duck.



The Flyway System was developed by biologists who were also WWII pilots. This system splits the continent into four separate flyways, each which has developed its own censusing, monitoring and management planning protocols.

Identifying Ducks

As with many birds, the complexity of colors and plumage patterns presented by various duck species requires careful and often prolonged study in order to identify them. Due to hunting pressure, ducks are understandably wary of human presence, and generally will not tolerate close study, especially during hunting season (November-January in Louisiana). Occasionally ducks will allow approaches by vehicles of 100 yards or less, so long as occupants remain inside their vehicles. In most cases, however, identification of individual duck species usually requires the use of a 20-60X spotting scope mounted on a tripod or vehicle window mount adaptor. Only hunters, well-concealed in blinds, have the opportunity (and responsibility) to identify ducks at closer range and without the aid of magnification equipment.

In any case, students of duck identification should begin by focusing on characters which are easiest to assess, including body size and shape, flight style, and the appearance (or lack thereof) of white patches on various parts of the bird's body. In many cases, tail shape/length and vocalizations can provide easy clues as to a bird's identity.

White coloration shows up well, as light reflects off of white surfaces, seeming to illuminate these surfaces, even from great distances and on cloudy days. The shapes and exact locations of the broad white upperwing patches of the Black-bellied Whistling Duck, the wigeons, the Common Goldeneye, the mergansers, and the White-winged Scoter are all often quite visible, as is the small white speculum

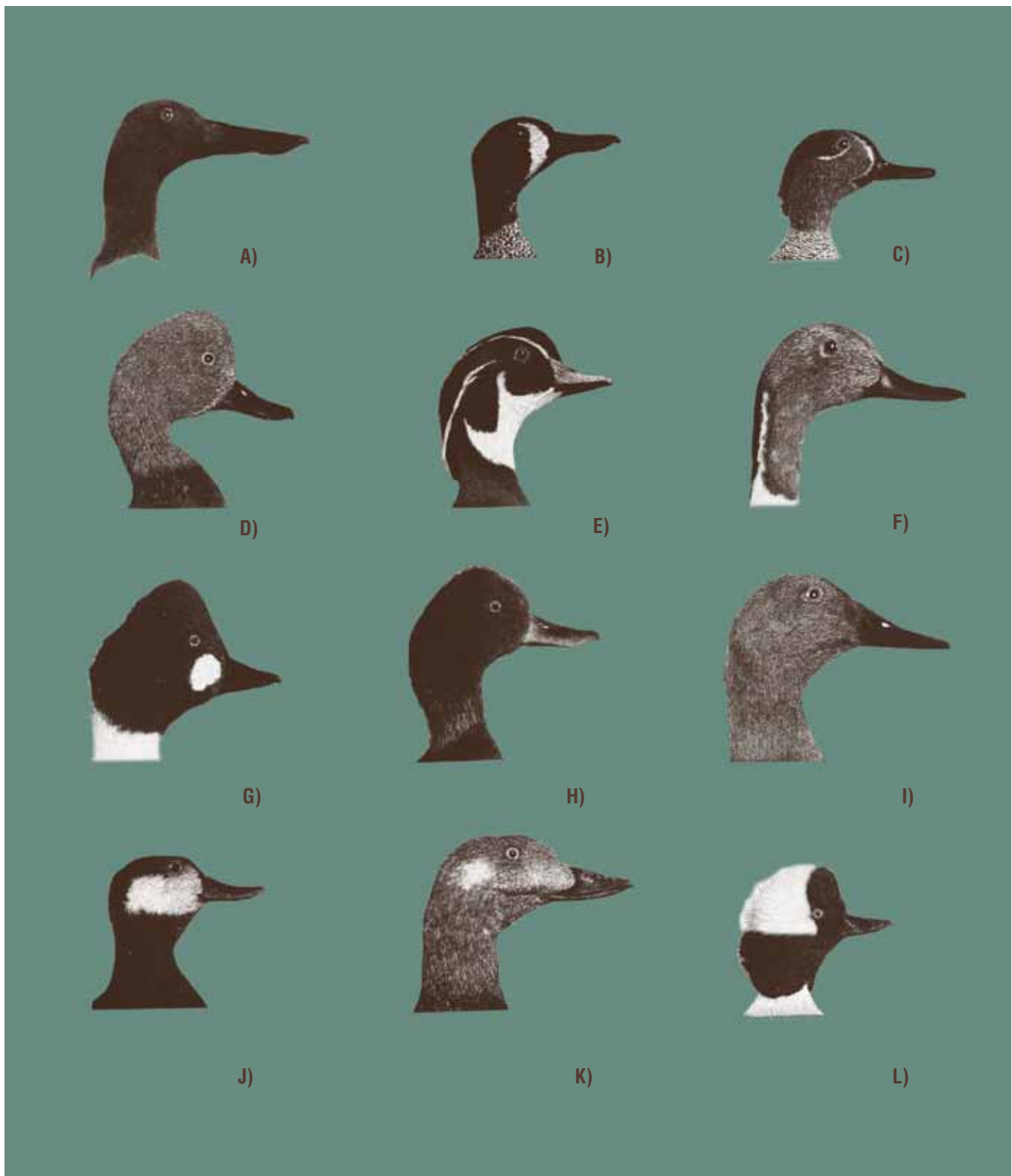
of the Gadwall, the white throat of the Wood Duck, the white crown of the male American Wigeon, the white bar dividing the breast and belly of the male Green-winged Teal, white ring around the bill of the Ring-necked Duck, and the distinctively-shaped white facial patches on the male Blue-winged Teal, female scaups, Long-tailed Duck, scoters, goldeneyes, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, and Ruddy Duck can all provide substantial clues in identifying these species.

Diving ducks sit low on the water, often with tails lowered, whereas dabbling ducks sit higher, often with tails raised. In the air, the short bodies of the Ring-necked Duck, scaups, and Ruddy Duck result in a "bumble-bee" appearance on the wing. Conversely, the long square tail of the Wood Duck gives it a sleeker, long-bodied look in the air. Similarly, the body of the Blue-winged Teal averages only 1.5" longer than that of the Green-winged Teal; but this, combined with the relatively shorter neck of the Green-winged, results in a more "buzzy" or "bumble-bee" flight style, compared with the longer, more graceful lines of the Blue-winged.

Duck vocalizations are another area of concentration for duck identification students. If ducks are whistling, for example, many species can be eliminated from contention, leaving only a few: Northern Pintail, the teals, and the wigeons (keeping in mind that the wings of some species such as the scoters and the goldeneyes can produce rather loud whistling of a different nature). Black-bellied Whistling Duck, Fulvous Whistling Duck,



Blue-winged Teal



Ducks can be identified by white patches on various parts of their bodies and also by the shape and size of their bills in relation to their head size. Note the differences in shape, bill size and white patches on these duck heads: A) Northern Shoveler

B) Blue-winged Teal C) Green-winged Teal D) Redhead
E) Wood Duck F) Pintail G) Common Goldeneye
H) Lesser Scaup I) Canvasback J) Ruddy Duck
K) White-winged Scoter L) Bufflehead

and Wood Duck are all quite vocal, each giving very loud and distinctive calls, especially when in flight.

In most cases, identification of female birds is more problematic than with males. Fortunately, females of each species are apt to stay in close proximity to the males of their kind, and keen duck observers do well to study female as well as male birds in such settings. With female ducks, the shape, color, and size of the bills becomes the focal point. Regarding bill size (relative to the head size), note how small the bills of the Wood Duck, the wigeons, the goldeneyes, and the Bufflehead can appear. When female Blue-winged and Green-winged teals are together, note the size disparity between the wide, spatulate bills of the former compared to the smaller more delicate ones of the latter. And of course the long thin appearance of the bills of the mergansers should quickly tip off an observer, immediately whittling the potential identification choices

down to three – rather than thirty – species!

As with all bird-watching, there is simply no substitute for experience in learning the ducks. The only way to learn is by time spent in the field, repeatedly studying every visible character and listening to every audible vocalization and wing-whistle in as wide a variety of duck species, viewing distances, and light-qualities as possible. Going out in the field with more experienced observers is highly recommended, as they can quickly point out the important characters, allowing beginners more time looking at the birds than at their field guides. And remember to keep as low-profile as possible, remaining in your vehicle if possible. If you must get out of your vehicle, do not slam doors, try to remain as near the vehicle as possible, and shorten your scope's tripod to where you can comfortably view from a kneeling position.

Common Merganser



The Whistling Ducks

Dendrocygna autumnalis
and *Dendrocygna bicolor*

More goose-like than duck-like in many respects, the whistling ducks possess broad blunt-tipped wings that beat more slowly than ducks – more like geese or ibis. Their legs are so long that they hang well past their tails in flight. When landing they hold their necks outstretched and heads down as they gradually “helicopter” down to the ground or water. Like geese, their vocalizations are sharply whistled and constantly given when in flight. Both of Louisiana’s whistling duck species originate from the tropics of coastal south Texas, Mexico and Central America, where they have gradually expanded northward through the northern Gulf Coast and beyond.







Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

Louisiana's first record of the **Black-bellied Whistling-Duck** (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) came from a hunter's bag in the Pecan Island area on 20 December 1969, involving a bird that had been banded on 10 April 1968 near Sinton, Texas. About one year later, a hunter took another bird – this one an immature specimen – from several miles north of Bossier City. Shortly thereafter, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were liberated from experimental enclosures at Rockefeller State Wildlife Refuge down in coastal Cameron Parish. Eventually these liberated birds set up nesting areas in nearby Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge, where they have been commonly reported through the present.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck reports suddenly spread through surrounding southwestern Louisiana parishes, and over the next 25 years have spread through the entire state and northward into the Mississippi River Valley of northern Arkansas and Mississippi. This duck has repeatedly exhibited a lack of concern or downright obliviousness toward human activities. Over the past decade, post-breeding flocks of over 1,000 individuals have been annually reported from,

among other places, urban New Orleans.

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks are overwhelmingly vegetarian in their food preferences, eating a variety of grain-type seeds including those of domesticated/exotic plants such as rice, sorghum, millet, and Bermuda grass. In all foraging studies, animal life (small snails, worms, and leeches) comprised less than 10% of this species' total intake. Preferred foraging habitat includes shallow vegetation-choked lakes, ponds, and freshwater marshes, as well as cultivated fields and pastures, where they have often been observed to forage goose-style on dry land.

Like the Wood Duck and Hooded Merganser, the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck nests in the cavities of swamp trees. At a community of camp houses down in southern Vermilion Parish, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have for years been using a large number of Wood Duck nesting boxes to rear their young. After fledging young they often form large flocks. Many of our Louisiana birds migrate southward into coastal Mexico for the winter, but a substantial number remain behind in south Louisiana, as is evidenced from the species' regular appearance on Christmas Bird Count tally sheets.





Fulvous Whistling-Duck

Among the most widely distributed duck species in the world, the **Fulvous Whistling-Duck** (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) lives in mostly tropical/sub-tropical regions of Africa and Asia as well as the Americas. Here in the New World it is a year-round resident along the Gulf Coast of southern Texas, the Atlantic Coastal Plain of peninsular Florida, the Gulf and Pacific coastal plains of Mexico, as well as Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Over the past century, it has been expanding its breeding range into more temperate regions, including mostly agricultural lands in extreme southern California, and the upper Gulf Coastal Plain of Texas and Louisiana.

Earliest Louisiana records for this species date back to the late 19th century, where birds were reported from the marshes and lakes of eastern New Orleans. By the 18

early 1900s records were established on the central and southwestern portions of Louisiana's coastal zone as well. By mid-century, Waterfowl Flyway Biologist John T. Lynch was the first to record rice field nesting of this species in southwestern Louisiana, reporting that birds were placing nests on both dry levees and (floating) on the water. As with the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck exhibits long-term pair-bonding, more akin to the geese than to other duck species.

Over the ensuing years it appears that this species has coalesced its Louisiana presence into the rice country of southwestern Louisiana, which includes not only the coastal zone but also within the rice fields well to the north of the Interstate-10 corridor up through Allen, Evangeline and Rapides parishes in central Louisiana. During an

intensive round of Louisiana Breeding Bird Atlas work in 1994-96, observers recorded “probable” nesting Fulvous Whistling-Ducks from a rice field in West Carroll Parish, tucked far up into the northeastern corner of the state.

As in Texas, most Louisiana hunters and rice farmers know it as the “Mexican Squealer.” Old Louisiana French names for it include *canard yankee* – which seems odd as the species came to Louisiana from the south and not the north – or simply *siffleur* (“whistler”).

About the size of a Wood Duck (but with shorter blunt-tipped wings), the Fulvous Whistling-Duck remains strongly neotropical in its migration pattern, with nearly all of the Louisiana breeding population departing the state for southern Texas and Mexico by November, and returning in large flocks in March. During the

winter months only a few birds are reported from coastal Louisiana, mostly from the isolated band of freshwater marshes in Cameron Parish.

As with the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is primarily granivorous in food preference, focusing on the seeds of moist-soil, floating aquatic, and emergent aquatic plants.

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck possesses long bluish-colored legs that hang behind its body in flight. These two characters, along with its slower ibis-like wing beats, distinguish it from other ducks except for its cousin, the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck. In the field, the white wing stripe, pink legs and bill, and black belly of the Black-bellied quickly distinguish it from the all-dark wings and golden-buff body of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck.



Fulvous Whistling-Duck





The Dabbling Ducks

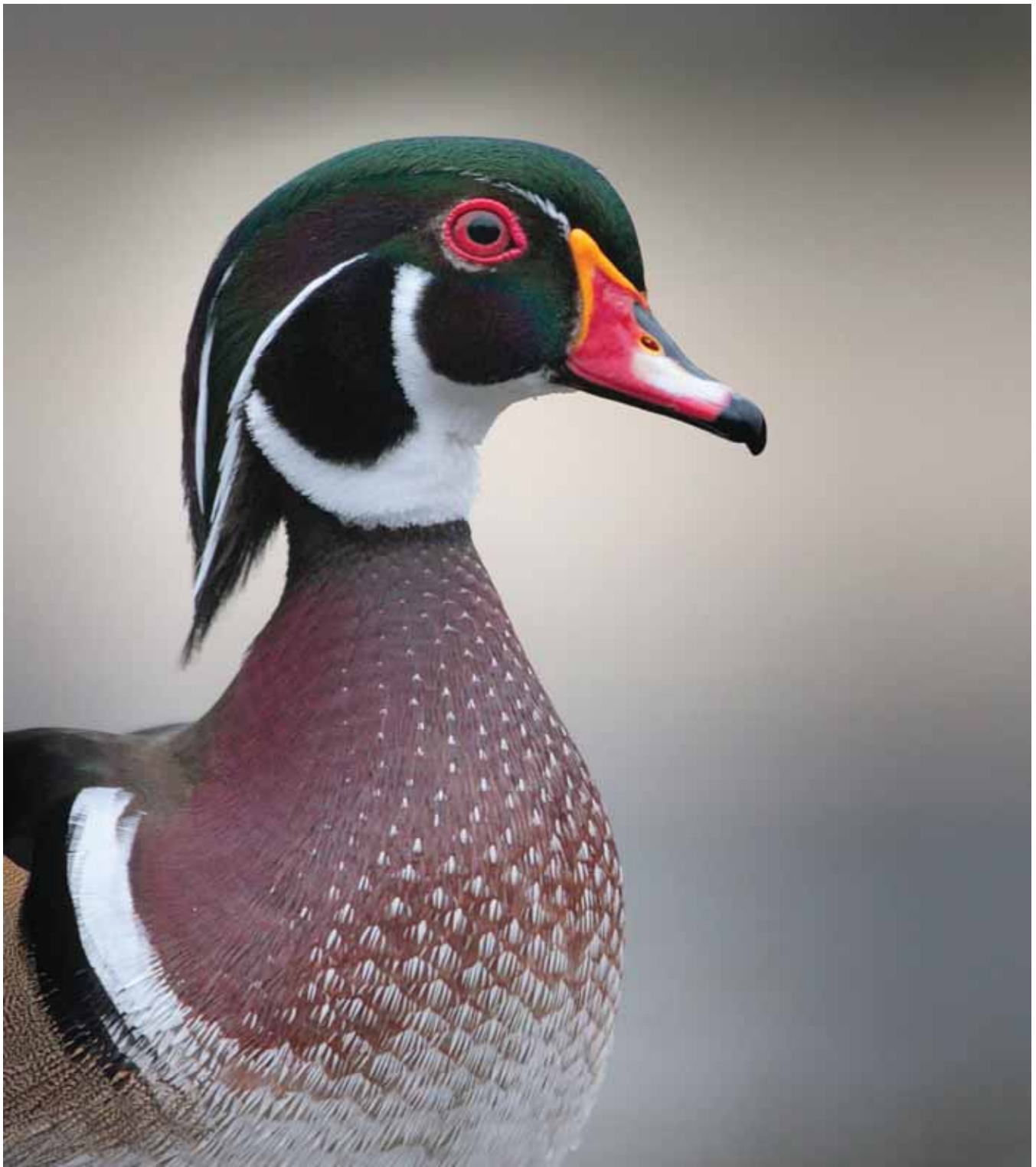
*T*he dabbling ducks are generally longer-bodied and relatively longer-necked and longer-winged than the diving ducks, resulting in more graceful and elegant lines both in flight and on the water. Dabbling ducks only rarely submerge their entire bodies when feeding below the water's surface, most often "tipping up" with head, neck, and breast submerged, leaving belly and tail above the water line. Unlike most diving ducks, dabbling ducks are able to walk comfortably on land, and can launch immediately into the air from water or land when taking flight.

Wood Duck

Aix sponsa

A member of the “Perching Duck” tribe of dabblers, the Wood Duck is considered by many to be the most beautiful duck in the world, rivaled only by its sibling species, the Mandarin Duck (*Aix galericulata*) of Australasia, the only other species within the tiny genus, *Aix*. The Wood Duck survived near-extinction back

toward the turn of the twentieth century, when it was severely overhunted both for its excellent flesh as well as fine plumage, which was highly desired for fishing flies. By 1918 the bag limit on Wood Duck was eliminated in the U.S. and Canada, and remained so for the next two decades. Fortunately, at the time, deep swamp habitats





still held a sufficient reserve of Wood Ducks, and by the middle of the century full recovery was achieved. Among other things, Texas ornithologist Harry Oberholser attributed the post-WWII construction of so many state parks with wooded lakes during the 1950s – coupled with the Wood Duck’s successful adaptation to artificial nest boxes and to the urban and suburban environments that offered them – as highlights in the comeback story of the Wood Duck.

Built for a life almost totally spent in forested wetlands, the Wood Duck possesses a long, stiff, square-tipped tail, used for steering through the trees as well as a prop when landing on and excavating around tree trunks. In flight, it holds its large head up above horizontal while tipping its small bill downward, traits which when combined with its long square tail equate to relatively easy identification. Moreover, the Wood Duck’s vocalizations, which it often gives both in flight and on water, are quite unique and carry well through the cathedral-like swamps and river bottoms which it inhabits.

One of several North American cavity-nesting duck species, the Wood Duck selects cavity trees (or nest boxes) located as near to permanent water as possible. Nest heights range from 6-50’. Upon fledging time, ducklings climb

out of the nest cavity using sharp claws and specialized hooks on the tips of their bills. Once at the cavity opening they drop fearlessly down to the mother hen who sits on the ground or water below, constantly calling. Females often produce two clutches of young per year, especially within the southern portions of the distribution range (e.g. the Gulf Coast states).

In addition to a wide variety of spiders, insects, and aquatic plants, Wood Ducks also eat the nuts of several tree species including oaks, hickories, and beech, as well as the fruits of others such as flowering dogwood, black cherry, and muscadine. They seem particularly fond of acorns, and have been known to dive to water depths of 3’ to secure them. Wood Ducks have also been observed eating pecans and filberts in commercial orchards.

Today, the Wood Duck breeds throughout all of the eastern U.S., the Pacific Northwest down through most of California, southern Canada, and Cuba. It is still eagerly sought by waterfowl hunters, and comprises about 10% of the total duck harvest each year in the U.S. In Louisiana, the Wood Duck nests in swamps and stream bottoms statewide. Old Cajun/Creole names include *canard branchu* (“branch-dwelling duck”) or simply *canard bois* (“wood duck”).

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Considered by hunters and ornithologists alike to be the best known and most highly adapted duck in the world, the Mallard has risen to iconic status, with the “Greenhead” emblem adorning all manner of outdoor gear and business signage. Indeed, the Mallard breeds throughout most of the continental U.S., Canada and coastal Greenland, as well as Europe, Asia, the Virgin Islands, the Hawaiian Islands, New Zealand, and Australia!

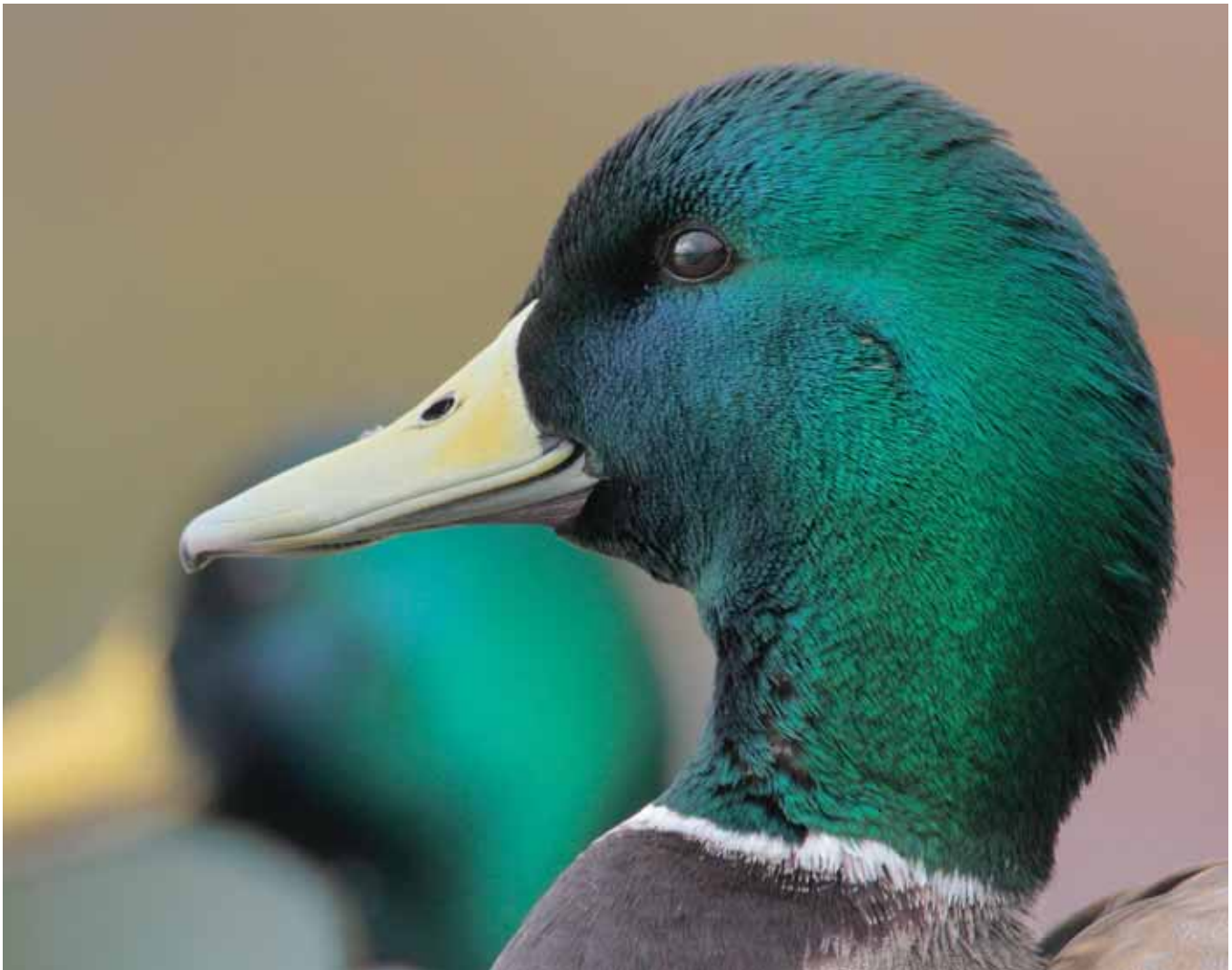
In North America the Mallard is the most abundant of all duck species. Recent estimates put the total North American Mallard population at about 10.5 million, well above its long-term average of about 8 million. Originally, it was known as a primarily central and western species, the Mallard has spread throughout the eastern U.S. as a result of habitat changes within its old range and introductions of domesticated Mallards into northeastern parks, farm ponds, etc. Presently, waterfowl biologists have become concerned that the Mallard is outcompeting the closely allied American Black Duck in its native eastern haunts, causing population declines in the latter species.

In Louisiana, results from the 1994-96 Louisiana Breeding Bird Atlas survey show confirmed or probable

Mallard nesting in no fewer than nine Louisiana parishes scattered across the state, though surveyors believe that all of those records are a result of domesticated birds that had escaped into the wild. Still, some suspect that naturally wild birds might occasionally nest here. In any case, our state annually hosts a winter population of about 200,000 birds. Prized in the Bayou State as much if not more than anywhere else, the old Cajun/Creole name for the Mallard is *canard Francais* (“French Duck” perhaps owing to the fact that French colonists knew the Mallard from France).

Mallards are known for their high degree of flexibility and adaptability in both their food and habitat preferences. The breeding epicenter for North American Mallards is the Prairie Pothole-Parkland region of south-central Canada and the upper-Midwest of the United States. An important secondary center is the Boreal Forest regions of Canada and the northern United States. Elsewhere across this species’ broad breeding range, the Mallard has taken advantage of many different habitat situations. In all breeding regions, Mallards are most attracted to densely-vegetated wetland edges associated with marshes, prairie ponds, bogs, rivers, and lakes, yet numerous reports also





detail downright odd nesting sites including rock piles, haystacks, and even roadsides.

In testimony to the Mallard's genetic dominance, most all of the world's domesticated ducks have descended directly from either the Mallard or the Muscovy Duck. In the wild, at least four species of New World ducks possess genetic affinities so close as to have at one time or another been considered subspecies of the Mallard: Mottled Duck, American Black Duck, Laysan Duck, and the Hawaiian Duck. Presently, two Mallard subspecies are recognized: the Mexican Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos diazi*) and the "Greenland" Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos conboschas*).

As with most duck species, Mallards are primarily carnivorous in food choices during the breeding season, consuming insects, snails, freshwater shrimp, and earthworms. Outside of breeding season, they turn to

the seeds, roots, and foliage of aquatic and moist-soil plants; but in winter their focus is on domestic grain crops including wheat, corn, barley, and rice. During hunting season, Mallards become mostly nocturnal feeders, roosting during the day on secluded open water, and commuting to harvested grain fields by night. Within the Mississippi Alluvial Valley wintering Mallards are most attracted to flooded bottomland hardwood forests where they forage for acorns, which they seem to favor over cereal crops.

Amazingly, researchers have found that Mallards are capable of literally sleeping with one eye open, noting brain activity within the hemisphere opposite the open eye, and normal sleep in the hemisphere opposite the closed eye.

Mottled Duck

Anas fulvigula

Known as the “Summer Mallard” throughout much of its U.S. Gulf Coast breeding range, or more simply as *canard d’ete* (“Summer Duck”) by Louisiana French-speakers, the Mottled Duck is distributed throughout the coastal zone of peninsular Florida westward through coastal Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas through Tampico on the northern Gulf Coast of Mexico. It is also nesting along the Atlantic Coast of Georgia and South Carolina as a result of recent introductions.

Breeding Bird Atlas records from Louisiana indicate that Mottled Duck nesting has expanded out of the coastal zone and up into large freshwater marsh and rice-growing areas in Sabine (Toledo Bend Reservoir), Morehouse, West Carroll, Rapides, Pointe Coupee, and West Feliciana parishes.

As with the American Black Duck in the northeastern U.S., the Mottled Duck population in Florida, and perhaps in other Gulf Coastal states such as Louisiana, is being threatened by hybridization with escaped domestic Mallards. In southwestern Louisiana, nest predation

by expanding populations of the coyote is yet another conservation issue involving this species. And in 1988, researcher C. E. Stutzenbaker found Mottled Duck remains in 20.9 % of the 43 alligator stomachs that he examined from southwestern Louisiana marshes, thus elevating the alligator far higher onto the list of potential Mottled Duck predators than previously suspected.

One positive note regarding Mottled Duck conservation is the fact that, like the Wood Duck, the Mottled Duck is adapting to urban and suburban wetland settings in Florida, where over half of that state’s Mottled Duck population presently resides.

Most recent U.S. Mottled Duck population estimates range just below 700,000 birds, the majority of which occur on the Texas and Louisiana coastal zones. However, the Texas population is believed to be rapidly declining as of late, compared with the Louisiana population thought to be relatively stable.

Owing to its close kinship with the Mallard and the American Black Duck, the Mottled Duck can be easily





confused with the female Mallard as well as either sex of the American Black Duck. In general, the Mottled Duck is substantially smaller than both the female Mallard and American Black Duck, and its body color is of a much darker brown than the Mallard, but significantly lighter than the chocolate-brown body of the American Black, which truly does appear to be black from a distance. The bill of the female Mallard is orange, marked with mottled black in the central part, whereas the bills of both sexes of the Mottled and American Black are unmarked. In the hand, these three species may be distinguished by

examining the speculum (patch of iridescent color on the hindwing), which is bordered above and below by thick white bars in the Mallard, much thinner white bars in the Mottled, and no white bars in the American Black.

Food studies have shown that animal life – primarily aquatic insects, snails, crawfish, and small fishes – can comprise over 40% of the Mottled Duck's diet, substantially more than most other North American duck species. Mottled Ducks prefer notably shallow (6" or less) water with lots of emergent aquatic vegetation for foraging.

American Black Duck

Anas rubripes

The American Black Duck is considered to be the northern counterpart to the Mottled Duck. Indeed, it was not until 1874 that ornithologists differentiated between the two. Prior to that, both were lumped into one species known as the Dusky Duck (*Anas obscura*).

The Black Duck's present breeding range is substantially larger than that of the Mottled Duck. Once confined to eastern Canada and the northeastern U.S., the breeding distribution range suddenly began to expand westward at the turn of the twentieth century, now encompassing much of Ontario and the Great Lakes region west into eastern North Dakota.

Birds migrate as far south as the Gulf Coast, but these days wintering Black Duck in the southern U.S. anywhere west of the state of Mississippi is a rare and irregular event. In Louisiana Birds (1974), George Lowery, Jr. wrote, "The best place in the state to look for the Black Duck is among the Mallards in the [flooded] soybean fields in the northern half of the state. Catahoula Lake and the Saline Wildlife Management Area are convenient locations, but everywhere the Black Duck is outnumbered by the Mallard 100-1." Over the past 60 years annual Louisiana Christmas Bird Count results have averaged fewer than 10 total American Black Ducks statewide.



Courtesy: U.S. Geological Survey



Courtesy: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

The American Black is a large duck, possessing body dimensions (length 23" wingspan 35" average weight 2.6 lbs.) comparable to that of the Mallard. It is thus visibly larger than the Mottled Duck (length 20" wingspan 30" average weight 2.2 lbs.) with which it can be easily confused, especially during the winter months when the southern part of its range overlaps with the year round range of the Mottled. While both American Black and Mottled ducks exhibit dark brown bodies which contrast with pale buff-brown heads and necks, the body coloration of the former is so dark that it actually appears black, especially from a distance. The iridescent speculum color of the Mottled tends toward blue-green whereas that of the American Black tends toward purple. The chin area of the Mottled is a clear unmarked buff, compared with that of the American Black which possesses dark streaking.

Lastly, a prominent dark facial spot occupies the base of the Mottled Duck's lower mandible, whereas the same area is unmarked in the American Black Duck.

Like the Mottled Duck, the American Black Duck favors marshland habitats, but also utilizes stream, lake, swamp, and bog edges in mixed hardwood and Boreal forests. Unfortunately, land use changes coupled with suspected introgressive hybridization with the Mallard have caused a substantial American Black Duck population decline from an estimated 800,000 in the 1950s to 300,000 in the 1990s. A successful 1982 lawsuit by the U.S. Humane Society and others resulted in limiting the hunting season to 30 days and the daily bag limit to one bird. These restrictions seem to have had a positive effect, as Black Duck populations have been gradually increasing since.

Gadwall

Anas strepera

Called the *canard gris* (“Gray Duck”) by Louisiana French-speakers, the Gadwall is a common winter visitor throughout much of the continental U.S. and Mexico, with the largest concentrations focused in coastal Texas and Louisiana. In Louisiana Birds (1974), George Lowery, Jr. mentions, “From early October until April the Gadwall is one of the commonest ducks in the coastal region of Louisiana.” Most recent (2016) estimates put the U.S. Gadwall population at 3.7 million birds, with just over 1 million overwintering in Louisiana.

The Gadwall is primarily a prairie-parkland breeder, nesting from coastal California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, and western Kansas northward through Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and well into the prairie provinces of Canada. As with many North American duck species, the Gadwall suffered severe declines due to habitat alteration and drought during the 1960s and 1970s, but improved conditions and wetland conservation activities in 1986-1996 brought on a 129% increase in Gadwall numbers, accompanied by breeding





range expansions into the northwestern, Great Lakes, and northeastern regions of the U.S. and into eastern Canada. It is also a well-represented breeder and winterer throughout much of Europe – where its population has been expanding since the turn of the twentieth century – along with western Asia, the Middle East, and northern Africa.

In *The Bird Life of Texas* (1974), Harry Oberholser wrote, “Combining its breeding and winter range, the Gadwall is one of the widest ranging of ducks. It occurs at one season or another from cold plains and partly wooded regions to hot deserts. The senior editor once saw a Gadwall standing in a tiny puddle on a road in the middle of Death Valley, California.”

The Gadwall is a mid-sized dabbler. From a distance the male appears somewhat drab-gray, punctuated fore and aft by a jet black bill and tail. Upon closer inspection, however, the beauty of the male’s plumage becomes apparent, featuring silvery and wheat-buff feathering on the back, large bay-colored patches on the forewing, and fine vermiculations on the head and sides. On the wing

and often even on the water, telltale bright-white patches along the trailing edge of the wing (speculum area) can be seen on both males and females.

This species tends to feed in deeper water than other members of its genus (Mallard, Pintail, teal, etc.), and most often over beds of submerged vegetation. Generally though, it takes the same sorts of food items – aquatic plant parts, insects and other invertebrates – as do the other dabbling ducks. Insects and other invertebrates are taken almost exclusively during the breeding season, and tend to be very small-sized such as microscopic crustaceans and midge larvae. In a November-March food study in Louisiana, algae comprised over one-third of the Gadwall’s diet, followed by other plants such as dwarf spike rush, widgeon grass, water milfoil, and coontail. Interestingly, the Gadwall is known to kleptoparasitize (rob) foraging coots in both North America and Europe. Like the Mallard, the Gadwall easily switches to a nocturnal feeding schedule when hunting pressure or other conditions dictate.

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

Known as the “sprigtail” or simply “sprig” by most North American hunters, some Louisiana French speakers refer to the Northern Pintail as *paille-en-queue* (“straw-in-tail”) or *cou-long* (“long neck”). Possessing long, slender neck, tail, and wings – punctuated by the long, thin needle-like central tail feathers of the male – this medium-sized dabbling duck cuts through the air with a grace and elegance seen in no other duck, particularly when accompanied by the male’s haunting train-whistle-like call. Even when high up in the sky, the long tail of a pintail may be seen through binoculars or scope, offering a major identification clue, for the only other North American duck species possessing such a tail is the male of the aptly-named Long-tailed Duck.

As with many North American ducks, the Northern Pintail is circumpolar in distribution, occurring in Eurasia as well as throughout much of the Americas north of the equator. In North America, pintails possess one of the

largest breeding ranges of all the *Anas* species. Nesting occurs throughout much of Canada and Alaska down through the Great Plains, Northwest, and Far West of the continental U.S., with wintering birds stretching southward through the entire southern half of the U.S. through Mexico, Central America, and Cuba, and down into northern South America.

Clocked at speeds of up to 65 mph, the Northern Pintail is one of the world’s swiftest ducks. This, combined with its long, slender lines, has caused some biologists to refer to it as the “greyhound of ducks.” It is also one of the earliest migrating species, departing its breeding grounds in early fall, just after Blue-winged Teal. By early February, birds are already trekking back up into nesting areas.

Birds nest on dry ground, often far from water or near semi-permanent wetlands, and are thus vulnerable to more predation, agricultural interference, and urbanization. The North American pintail population suffered severe





declines between 1970-1990, dropping from 6 million birds to less than 3 million during that period. Presently, conservation measures have induced a fair degree of stability, and the North American population stands at about 3.5 million birds. Recent (2016) estimates put the Louisiana winter population of the Northern Pintail at about 179,000 birds. Though not known to breed in Louisiana, ornithologist George Lowery, Jr. wrote of a female with a brood observed in 1971 on the Delta National Wildlife Refuge at the mouth of the Mississippi River.

In winter, the Northern Pintail seems most attracted to large open expanses of shallow water, such as those

found in lakes, estuaries, and agricultural fields – flooded or simply muddy – where it occasionally congregates in great flocks. In the late winter of 1988-89 a flock estimated at 10,000 birds (potentially, 10% or more of all Louisiana pintails!) was observed in an very large, muddy agricultural field in southern Rapides Parish.

As with the Mallard, the Northern Pintail can readily shift into a nocturnal foraging pattern, especially as a result of hunting pressure on its wintering grounds. In Louisiana, researcher R. R. Cox noted Northern Pintails making evening flights to foraging areas at distances of 1-50 kilometers.

American Wigeon

Anas americana



Zinzin (pron. zahn-zahn, using the short A, as in “ant”) is the Louisiana French name for the American Wigeon. It seems a most curious name indeed, as no one has been able to definitively translate its English meaning. Long time south Louisiana waterfowl biologist John Lynch postulated that zinzin might have been a derivation of the French *zinzolin* (“purplish cast”) in reference to the

purplish suffusion on the head of the female and lower head of the male. Many North American hunters still call the wigeon the “baldpate” in reference to the bright white crown of the male.

A New World duck, the American Wigeon breeds in wetland-associated upland thickets throughout much of Canada from the Bearing Sea eastward through Hudson



Bay, and southward through the Prairie-Pothole/Parkland region of the northwestern U.S., where the winter Baldpate population is said to be at its most dense. Its wintering range extends southward to cover most of the U.S., the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America into northern South America.

Over the past 30 years its continental population numbers have fluctuated rather dramatically with alternating wet (up to 3.5 million birds) and dry (as low as 1.8 million birds) cycles on its breeding grounds. Biologists have noted recent eastward expansions of its breeding range into grassy islands and marshes along rivers and bays in southern Ontario and Quebec, and east through parts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Most recent estimates put the continental American Wigeon population at just under 3.4 million birds. In Louisiana, the American Wigeon is among the least populous of our regularly-occurring winter ducks, with only 8,000 birds counted here in December 2016.

Long-tailed, large-headed, small-billed, and stocky, the American Wigeon is a medium-sized duck that appears somewhat goose-like when standing on the ground, especially in side-by-side comparisons with the longer-bodied and more elegant lines possessed by other dabblers. Its short, thin bill is a pale almost chalky-blue color that gleams under bright light, offering a major identity clue.

Termed “an aggressive and opportunistic forager” by ecologist Thomas Mowbray, the American Wigeon spends much of its time grazing on vegetation in terrestrial situations. It is not proficient at diving, nor at filter-feeding by straining water through its short narrow bill. On the water, then, it often makes its living stealing plant materials either directly or indirectly from coots and diving ducks – and in some instances – even muskrats!

In flight its long tail is evident, as are its black-and-white upperwing and all-white underwing pattern. Males give a rather soft, three-syllabled wee-WEE-whew! whistle in flight.

Eurasian Wigeon

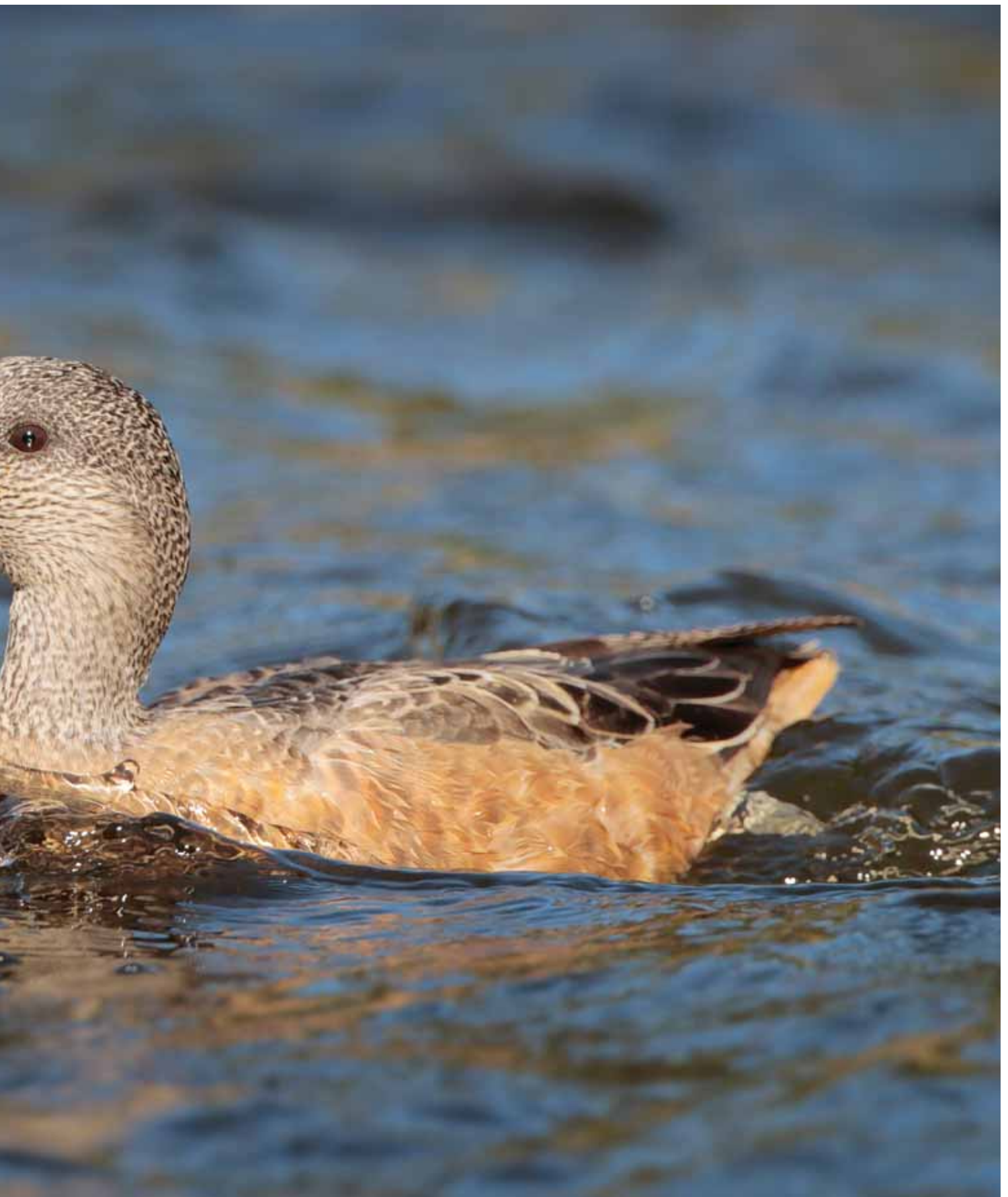
Anas penelope

Possessing a warmer-hued reddish-brown head and gray underwings (vs. cooler-hued purplish-brown head and white underwings in American Wigeon) the Eurasian Wigeon is an Old World species, breeding throughout the boreal zone over much of Europe and Asia, and wintering southward from Scandinavia and the British Isles and southern Russia into Saudi Arabia, India, Nigeria, and Kenya.

A modest but steady number of stragglers of both wigeon species cross over into one another's respective hemispheres on a regular basis, mostly during the winter months. Here in the U.S., vagrant Eurasian Wigeons often mix in with American Wigeons, and are most often observed within the northern-Atlantic and northern-Pacific coasts, although a fair number are also detected within the North American interior and along the Gulf Coast. Records of the Eurasian Wigeon are scant in Louisiana. Prior to 1979, only two reports were known, one involving a male and two females shot in northern Cameron Parish in 1915, and the other a female shot just north of Alexandria, LA around 1929. Because no specimens or photos of the individuals collected were forwarded to the LSU Museum of Natural Sciences, both of these reports were eventually struck from Louisiana's official ornithological record.

Beyond those two incidents, four Eurasian Wigeon records exist for Louisiana, all of which involved single male birds: one from Vermilion Parish on 23 November 1979, one from Lafourche Parish observed 09 January – 04 February 1990, and two from Orleans Parish of birds observed from 14 December 1980 – 22 February 1981, and 29 December 1996 – 16 February 1997 respectively.





Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

While admired by birders for the male's beautiful plumage, the flesh of the Northern Shoveler or "Spoonbill" is disdained by waterfowl hunters, earning it a number of derisive nicknames including "Dredgeboat," "Mud-lark," "Broadfaced Mallard," and "Smiling Mallard." The Cajun/Creole name is *micoine* (pron. mee-kwahn), an old Canadian/northern U.S. Native American name for "spoon," brought down to Louisiana by the Canadian French. With over 400,000 of North America's total 5 million Northern Shovelers counted annually in Louisiana, chances are that any of these names receive substantial use here.

In North America, the Northern Shoveler possesses a distribution range occupying the western half of Canada

through most of the northwestern quadrant of the U.S., nearly all of Alaska, and then southward (in winter) through most of the remaining U.S., Mexico, Central America, northern South America, the Caribbean, and even Hawaii. In the eastern hemisphere it breeds from Scandinavia and the British Isles eastward across central Europe and Ukraine through Siberia, wintering from points immediately south down through Portugal, Spain, India, southern China, Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, and Kenya.

Closely related to the teal, but named for its outsized bill, the Northern Shoveler behaves much like the former. Its bill is fashioned specifically for straining *Daphnia* and other tiny crustaceans (amphipods) and organisms from the water. Like the teal, it prefers shallow, open wetlands





with plenty of submerged vegetation including artificial wetlands such as oxidation ponds and rice fields. The soft rim of its bill, along with its tongue and the roof of its mouth are all very sensitive, allowing this species to accept or reject whatever items it encounters.

Small groups often mill about together on the water, stirring up mud and detritus which following birds strain for food. When foraging in rich environments, birds can be observed swimming substantial distances with heads submerged, collecting tiny crustaceans – not unlike

whales collecting krill or plankton. Unlike most dabblers, the Northern Shoveler is decidedly carnivorous in its food habits on a year-round basis.

In the air, Northern Shovelers are swift fliers, traveling mostly in small flocks (25 or fewer individuals), with heads held downward, resulting in a somewhat “hunch-backed” appearance when airborne. Shovelers are rather quiet ducks, with males only occasionally giving weak whoa-woo-whoa or took-took-took vocalizations.

Blue-winged Teal

Anas discors

The Blue-winged Teal possesses a New World distribution range very similar to that of the Northern Shoveler, although the breeding range of the teal extends further south into the southern U.S. Too, the majority of Blue-winged Teals overwinter farther south than the spoonbill, mostly in northern South America.

Firmly entrenched as a breeder in the Mixed Grass Prairie-Parkland region of the north-central U.S. and the Prairie Provinces of Canada, nesting Blue-winged Teal quickly become spotty and irregular as one moves in any direction away from its continental breeding epicenter. Nonetheless, it is one of only two North American *Anas* species (the other, *Anas fulvigula*, the Mottled Duck) to regularly nest in Louisiana, with the majority of nest records concentrated in the heavily-vegetated freshwater marsh ponds of our coastal zone.

Here the annual Blue-winged Teal population ebbs and flows along with the seasons, dictated primarily by the climatic conditions. It is the first of the Nearctic ducks to arrive in fall. In the month of September nearly a half-million birds are sometimes counted in Louisiana. By early winter, the count may already be whittled down to 25% (about 115,000 birds) or less of the early fall numbers. And depending on the severity of our December-January weather, might ebb to 12.5% or less by late winter.

As early as February, migrants from points south begin flowing back northward into southwestern Louisiana, and by March our rice fields and crawfish ponds are again filled with Blue-winged Teal, usually in the company of a like number of returning Fulvous Whistling-Ducks and early-migrating shorebirds such as American Golden-Plover and Pectoral Sandpiper. The Blue-winged Teal's





high spring and fall numbers here have earned it a few French Louisiana nicknames: *printanier* or *sarcelle du printemps* (“spring teal”), and *sarcelle d’automne* (“fall teal”).

The Blue-winged Teal is a small duck, possessing a body length which averages just under 16” and a weight of a mere 13oz. Still, its relatively long wings, neck, and bill give it a graceful appearance both in the air and on the water. The large pale-blue forewing patch combined with the white facial crescent and white underwings of the male allow for rather easy identification, especially on low-flying birds. The higher-frequency wingbeats of the teal and other small ducks give the illusion that they

are flying faster than larger ducks. In truth the average airspeeds of the teal are lower than those of the Mallard, and certainly lower than the Northern Pintail.

Though it possesses a bill that is similarly spatulate – if not as exaggeratedly so – as that of its close cousin the Northern Shoveler, the overwhelmingly vegetarian diet of the Blue-winged Teal is nearly opposite that of the spoonbill. Only during breeding season do female Blue-wingeds go after protein originating from insect larvae and snails. Otherwise, small seeds of moist-soil and aquatic plants comprise the bulk of its food choices. Like the Northern Shoveler, the Blue-winged Teal rarely, if ever, dives or even tips up for food items.

Cinnamon Teal

Anas cyanoptera

The Cinnamon Teal breeds throughout the Americas and has been split into five subspecies. The northernmost subspecies, *Anas cyanoptera septentrionalium*, possesses a breeding range confined mostly to the Great Basin and intermountain west of the U.S., barely leaking into extreme southwestern Canada and north-central Mexico.

The Cinnamon Teal's similarity in size, structure, plumage, and behavior to the Blue-winged Teal demonstrates that these two species are very closely related, and suggests that both have very recently evolved from very similar ecologies. Indeed, females of these two species are extremely difficult – if not impossible – to separate in the field, with the bill of the Blue-winged averaging just a few millimeters narrower, and the face of the Blue-winged averaging a bit more dark streaking.

In the arid West, the Cinnamon Teal is closely tied to heavily vegetated seasonal to semi-permanent wetlands associated with marshes, reservoirs, sluggish streams, irrigation ditches, and stock ponds, most often nesting in thickets of rushes and sedges at the water margins. Habitat preference in the winter range closely approximates the

shallow open water with heavy floating and submerged vegetation favored by the Blue-winged Teal. It is thought, however, that the Cinnamon Teal does not make use of flooded ag fields as much as the Blue-winged.

Primary wintering areas for the U.S. subspecies of Cinnamon Teal stretch from the Pacific Coast and interior valleys of California down through the southern Baja, eastward through the southern portions of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, and through all of Mexico to southern Guatemala. During each migration period numerous birds stray into the central and eastern U.S. and during each winter a number of birds end up along the Gulf Coast.

In Louisiana, where it is known as *sarcelle rouge* (“red teal”) the first Cinnamon Teal record dates back to 1849 and involves a specimen shot by E. Pilate’ near Opelousas (St. Landry Parish). It is thought that this specimen was deposited in the museum at the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences shortly after its collection. Over the next hundred years numerous (mostly unsubstantiated) records accumulated including one from the Delta Duck





Club in January 1911, a year in which ornithologist H.C. Oberholser reported that “about 20” Cinnamon Teal were taken throughout Louisiana.

In his first edition (1955) of Louisiana Birds, George Lowery, Jr. wrote, “Although there are fewer than a dozen definite records for this western teal in our state, it possibly occurs here regularly in winter.” Some twenty years later, Cinnamon Teal records had crept up to “less than two dozen,” with Lowery maintaining that it “is not reported every year in the state, but it probably occurs here with

fair regularity in small numbers.” Obviously most of these early records had come from waterfowl hunters’ bags, but as the numbers of birders and mid-winter Christmas Bird Count events grew in the state, Cinnamon Teal reports increased accordingly. Today in Louisiana up to a half-dozen male Cinnamon Teal are reported each winter, mostly from the marshlands within our coastal zone, with perhaps that number or more going unreported by some hunters.

Green-winged Teal

Anas crecca



With three subspecies, the Green-winged Teal makes use of nearly the entire northern hemisphere at one part of the year or another. It is a common breeder and winterer throughout most of North America and the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, and in colder weather down as far south as Central America and through the Nile region of North Africa. In contrast to most other dabbling ducks, breeding Green-winged Teal generally eschew prairie-pothole habitats, preferring deciduous parklands associated with river deltas and other open-canopied forested wetlands.

United States population estimates for the Green-winged Teal have been set at about 3.3 million birds. According to waterfowl biologists its population numbers are trending upwards, probably due to the fact that it

nesting in comparatively isolated and secluded swampy areas where agriculture and urban expansion are not issues. Louisiana annually hosts nearly a half-million Green-winged Teal, making it second only to the Gadwall as the most populous wintering species in the state. Here, some hunters still know it as the *sarcelle d'hiver* ("winter teal").

Averaging only 14" in length and 12oz. in weight the Green-winged Teal is North America's smallest dabbling duck. Its small size and quick, deep wingbeats allow for agile flying. To uninitiated observers, this quickness in flight might translate to absolute airspeed, for many believe the Green-winged Teal to be the fastest of all ducks. Actually, Green-winged Teal airspeeds average no more than 30-40mph, compared to the 45-55mph

averaged by most larger dabbling ducks. Regardless, when flying low in small groups, Green-winged Teal hold their heads high, and constantly twist and “turn on a dime” in unison, putting on spectacular shows. Landing with the same quickness as flying, they suddenly fold their wings, drop their heads, and pitch forward in a comparatively undignified manner.

As with the Northern Shoveler and the other teal species, the Green-winged Teal is a shallow water feeding specialist, most attracted to marshy areas with lots of submerged vegetation and muddy bottoms, including rice fields, crawfish ponds, and other flooded ag fields. Smaller-

billed than the other teal and the shoveler, which tend to prefer plankton-sized plant and animal life, the Green-wing’s menu of food items is broader and includes the seeds of grasses, sedges, and other aquatic plants as well as aquatic insects and larvae, along with snails, crustaceans, and other items.

Though not reported in the literature, Louisiana birders have noticed Green-winged Teal flocking in the decidedly open and unvegetated nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico, especially in late winter. It is not known whether these birds are foraging, resting, or simply staging prior to northward migration in these marine habitats.



The Divers and Stifftails

*I*n contrast to the dabbling ducks, the diving ducks and stifftails possess shorter, stouter bodies and body parts, allowing for greater maneuverability when swimming underwater. More robust or “chunky” in appearance, the bodies of these ducks are actually more fusiform in shape when underwater, providing for a more direct sub-surface swimming motion, particularly when propelled by their proportionately short legs and large feet, which are outfitted with lobed hind toes.





Canvasback

Aythya valisineria

The Canvasback is a large-bodied, relatively short-winged diver which makes its home exclusively in North America. It breeds up in the mixed-grass Prairie-Pothole-Parkland region of the northern Great Plains of the U.S. and southwestern Canada all the way up through the wetlands associated with the tundra and boreal forest habitats of northwestern Canada's Yukon through central Alaska. One of the swiftest ducks, migrating Canvasbacks have been clocked at speeds of up to 60mph.

During the non-breeding season it seeks the buds and roots of *Valisineria americana* or wild celery, an aquatic plant that the Canvasback favors so much that its species name was derived from it. A strong diver, it also forages on other submerged aquatic plants and takes animal foods such as snails and small clams at depths approaching 30-feet.

According to ecologist Thomas Mowbray, the Canvasback has somewhat shifted its migration pathways since the 1960s, probably in response to a decline in continental populations of tuberous aquatic plants.



The winter months find the Canvasback congregating at traditional wintering sites in bays and coastal lakes along the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf coasts of the U.S., more recently concentrating in especially high numbers in San Francisco and San Pablo Bays on the Pacific side, Chesapeake Bay and Pamlico Sound on the Atlantic, and the delta lakes of southeastern Louisiana on the northern Gulf of Mexico.

Handsomely proportioned and highly-regarded by hunters and birders alike, the Canvasback is called *canard cheval* (“horse duck”) in French Louisiana, and similarly, pato caballo in Spanish by the *Isleno* people of St. Bernard Parish. The crown of the Canvasback's long head slopes seamlessly into its equally-long bill, generating an unmistakable equine-like profile, distinguishable even from long distances – particularly in combination with its stark white, black, and bright-chestnut plumage pattern.

Annually, over 10% of North America's Canvasbacks overwinter in Louisiana, focusing on the large shallow lakes along the Mississippi Delta. Catahoula Lake in northeastern Louisiana is also a traditional Canvasback site. According to the January 2017 Louisiana waterfowl census, 158,000 of the state's 166,000 Canvasbacks were counted at Catahoula Lake alone.



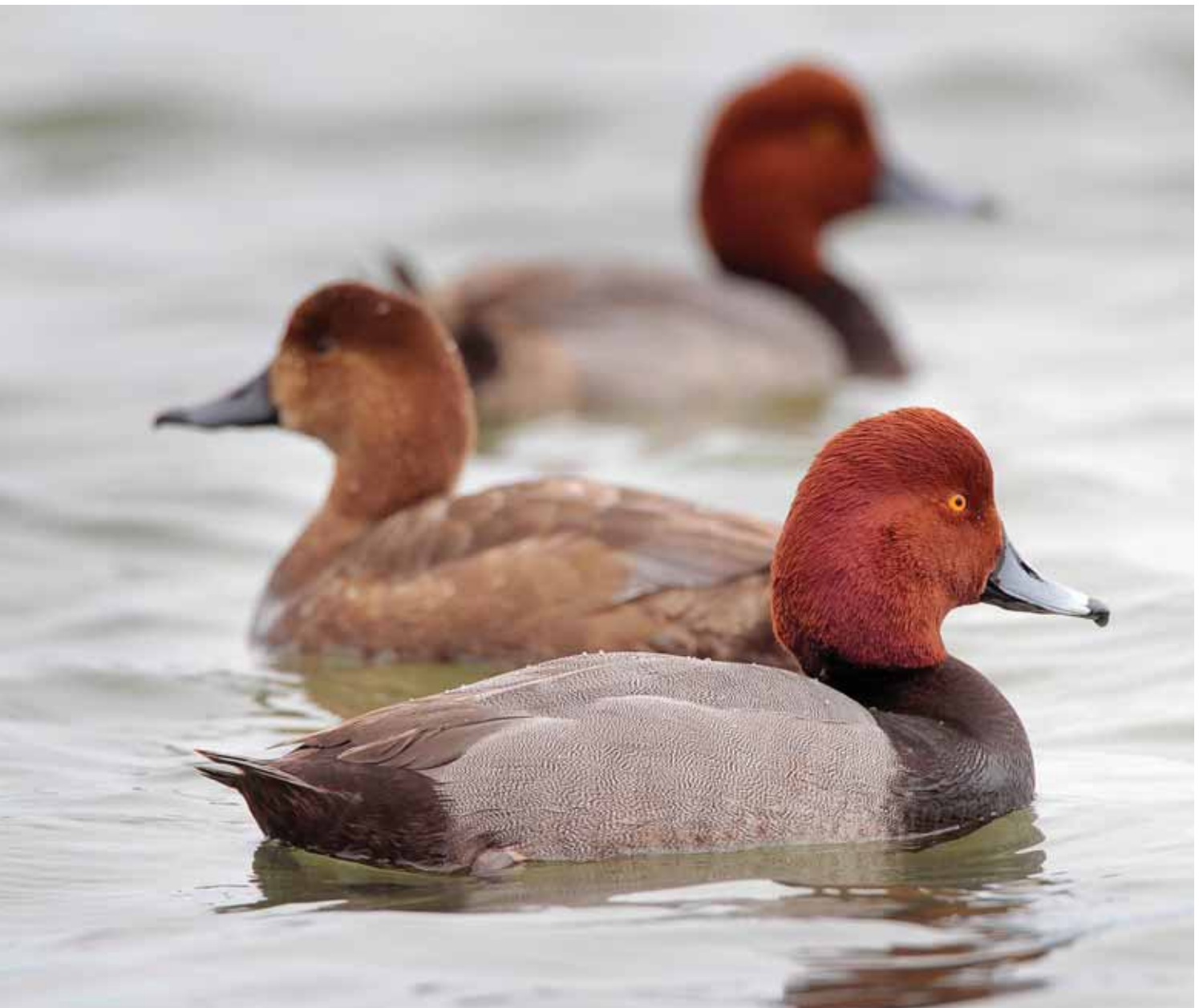
Redhead

Aythya americana

The Redhead is a medium-large diver with breeding and wintering ranges endemic to North America. At first glance, its breeding range appears very similar to that of the Canvasback, covering the marshy Prairie-Pothole-Parkland region of the northern Great Plains up through the northwestern U.S. and into central Alaska. But more than any other breeding duck in North America, the Redhead's distribution range is pocked with many

disjunct breeding pockets scattered from Alaska southward through the Great Lakes, the entire western U.S. and as far south as the state of Jalisco in southern Mexico!

In the winter months the Redhead can potentially be found almost anywhere in the U.S. and Mexico, but more and more it tends to favor the bays and coastal lakes along the northern rim of the Gulf of Mexico, in search of shoalgrass (*Halodule wrightii*), its favorite food.





It also feeds on other aquatic plants, mollusks, and other invertebrates, foraging mostly in water depths of 3-feet or less.

Louisiana duck biologist Tommy Michot, who has worked with Redheads for many years, recently noted that similar to that of the Canvasback, a measurable southward shift has occurred in the Redhead's primary U.S. winter range over the past several decades. Traditionally, high winter concentrations of Redheads occurred in Chesapeake Bay and other mid-Atlantic coastal bays, whereas today highest concentrations occur around Apalachee Bay in the Florida panhandle, the Chandeleur Sound off the coast of southeastern Louisiana, and especially in the Laguna Madre region of south Texas and northern Mexico.

Like the Canvasback, the Redhead possesses a bright rufous-red head, but its bill is blue with a black tip,

encircled with a white sub-terminal band – very similar in pattern to that of the Ring-necked Duck. Bill shape and color, along with gray body color (vs. white) and shallow more rapid wing beats (vs. slower/deeper) all distinguish the male Redhead from the similar-looking male Canvasback.

In French Louisiana the Redhead is sometimes called *violon* after the quality of its wing whistle. Due to its similarity with the Canvasback, however, it is more often referred to as *canard mulet* or “muley” (a “mule” of the “horse duck”). Annually, a good smattering of small groups of Redheads occur in large and small lakes throughout most of Louisiana – mere drops in the bucket compared to the many thousands that annually occur in Chandeleur Sound.

Ring-necked Duck

Aythya collaris

Named for the obscure maroonish-brown band around its otherwise black neck, the Ring-necked Duck possesses a blue bill ringed fore and aft in white, earning it the nickname “ring bill.” In size, shape, and general color pattern this species superficially resembles the scaups, but may be easily separated from them when on the water by its bill color pattern (vs. plain blue in the scaups) and black back (vs. gray in the scaups).

This mid-sized diver breeds in the river deltas and other forested wetlands of the northwestern U.S. and western Canada. In the 1930s its breeding range expanded eastward through the Great Lakes to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick; and more recently (1980s) northwestward through the Yukon and interior of Alaska.

Ring-necks winter throughout much of the western and southern U.S., Mexico, and the Caribbean. In both breeding and non-breeding seasons they prefer permanent open shallow freshwater wetlands, but temporarily

flooded agricultural lands such as Louisiana rice fields also prove attractive. They feed on aquatic insects and other invertebrates such as worms, leeches, and snails, but primarily on seeds and plant parts of floating and submerged aquatic species such as water lily, coontail, wild celery, flatsedge, wild rice, arrowhead (*Sagittaria*), and others. Known to occur in small groups, it appears that sizes of foraging groups are dramatically increasing in Florida and probably in Louisiana, where Ring-neck diets are shifting to hydrilla, a locally abundant exotic aquatic weed.

In Louisiana, where it is most commonly known as the “Black Jack” or *canard noir*, the Ring-necked Duck is a common winter visitor statewide in reservoirs, lakes, ponds, freshwater marshes, and flooded ag fields – often observed feeding in shallow water in the company of coots and dabbling ducks. Most recent estimates (January 2017) put the Louisiana winter population at 404,000 birds.





Greater Scaup

Aythya marila

As the common name implies, the Greater Scaup is larger than the Lesser, but only by about ten percent (18" vs. 16.5" total length). Interestingly, however, the Greater averages about 2.3 lbs in weight –over twenty percent more than the Lesser's 1.8 lb. average weight.

The Greater Scaup is the only diving duck with circumpolar (aka Holarctic) distribution, but its breeding sites are relatively small, spotty, and are generally located in very isolated sub-arctic coastal tundra habitats. Highest North American breeding concentrations are in western Alaska and the Aleutian Island chain. Breeding is very spotty through Canada's Northwest Territories eastward to Hudson Bay. In Eurasia it breeds in similar habitats from Scandinavia eastward through eastern Siberia.

The North American Greater Scaup population winters primarily in the nearshore marine waters off the Atlantic (60-70%), Pacific (20%), and Gulf (10%) Coasts; but also throughout the coastal waters of the Great Lakes.

In Louisiana, birders and knowledgeable hunters are always excited to encounter Greater Scaup as it is a decidedly uncommon winter residents here. Traditional French-speakers in southwest Louisiana separated Greater from Lesser scaup, referring to the latter as *dos-gris* ("gray-back") and the former as *dos-gris de mer* ("gray-back of the sea"). In his 1942 report on traditional coastal Louisiana colloquial names of plants and animals, biologist John Lynch mentions that former market hunters along the southeastern coast below New Orleans referred to the





Greater Scaup as the “outside dos-gris,” in reference to its preference for marine waters.

In the hand, the scaups may be safely separated by differences in size and weight as well as slight differences in head shape, nail shape (the small horny protuberance at the tip of the bill), and the extent of white along the bases of the wing feathers – none of which alone are helpful in discerning between the two species from a distance in the field. Rather, it is a combination of the abovementioned characters, not the least of which should include direct body size and head shape comparisons with adjacent ducks of other species (especially the Lesser Scaup!), which field

observers are forced to use to identify birds suspected of being Greater Scaups.

Thus, it remains difficult to know just how many Greater Scaup overwinter in Louisiana on average, for not only does it closely resemble the far more numerous Lesser Scaup, but it is also probable that the majority of Greater Scaup overwinter offshore, where neither amateur nor professional ornithologists have attempted to discern their numbers. Nevertheless, a fairly substantial number of Greater Scaups are reliably recorded throughout Louisiana each winter, mostly from fresh or brackish situations such as lakes and reservoirs, oxidation ponds, and marsh pools.

Lesser Scaup

Aythya affinis

Known simply as the *dos gris* (pron. “doe-GREE”), often contracted into the English “dog” by south Louisiana hunters, the Lesser Scaup visits Louisiana in large numbers each winter. While omitting the nearshore Gulf waters from their routine winter waterfowl surveys – where Lesser as well as Greater scaups are both known to winter – aerial duck surveyors do make a special effort to survey the scaup population each January, focusing their efforts in Lake Ponchartrain and Catahoula Lake where impressive concentrations traditionally occur.

Continent-wide, the scaup population experienced a slow, steady decline from the 1970s through the present. Causes for this decline were thought to stem primarily from breeding and wintering habitat degradation, where similar declines in clam and mussel populations – the scaup’s main food source – are occurring. Recent estimates fix the North American population at about 5 million birds, similar to the 2015 survey estimates. The most recent scaup population estimate for Louisiana (January 2017) was 69,000 birds, representing a significant decrease

from the 204,000 counted just one month earlier.

In contrast to the Greater Scaup, the Lesser Scaup’s North American breeding range is broad and contiguous, extending from the forested tundra of interior of Alaska southeastward through the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. From there, breeding densities decline into the Pacific Northwest and eastward through the northern U.S. and Quebec. The Lesser Scaup’s winter range is equally broad, taking in the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts, much of the southern U.S., Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

On their breeding grounds the scaups focus on amphipods, midges, and leeches, adding more aquatic plant seeds as the summer wears on. In winter, diets are comprised mostly of animal life, including small clams and mussels, which they hunt by diving to the bottom and probing with their bills and swinging them side to side as they swim along. Completely at home underwater, they even swallow prey items while submerged.





Ruddy Duck

Oxyura jamaicensis



The Ruddy Duck is a common nester throughout southwestern Canada, much of the western U.S., Mexico, and the Caribbean. It relies on emergent marsh associated with prairie potholes, reservoirs, lakes, and stock ponds, so long as the site possesses a combination of enough dense emergent vegetation as well as open water which they need in order to launch into flight. Like the coots, Ruddy Ducks patter on the water for long distances before becoming airborne. This duck's short, stubby legs are located far toward the back of the body, resulting in ungainly locomotion on the ground. In fact the Ruddy Duck is considered to be the least terrestrially-mobile waterfowl species in all of North America. In lieu of walking, birds have even been observed to lay on the ground and push themselves along, the way penguins sometimes do.

Much has been recorded regarding the overall strangeness of the Ruddy Duck's breeding cycle. The male's courtship display has been alternately described as comical or bizzare. For her size, the female lays the

largest eggs of all North American waterfowl. Her eggs are plain white, pebble-textured, and possess the thickest shells of all ducks. Regarding breeding territory, Ruddy Ducks are said to be the most pugnacious defenders of all. On occasion, some have even been observed to chase off rabbits feeding along the shore of their nesting territory.

Ruddy Ducks are outstanding divers, and do most of their foraging in that manner. They are mostly carnivorous, consuming aquatic insects, small crustaceans, and zooplankton, the latter which they often strain from the water surface as they swim along. A number of food studies suggest that Ruddy Ducks seem to specialize in midge larvae, with that prey item most often comprising the majority of their daily take.

In winter, Ruddy Ducks inhabit all manner of wide open water, from lakes and reservoirs, bays and estuaries, to oxidation and aquaculture ponds. Their wintering range encompasses all of the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf Coastal states.



Masked Duck

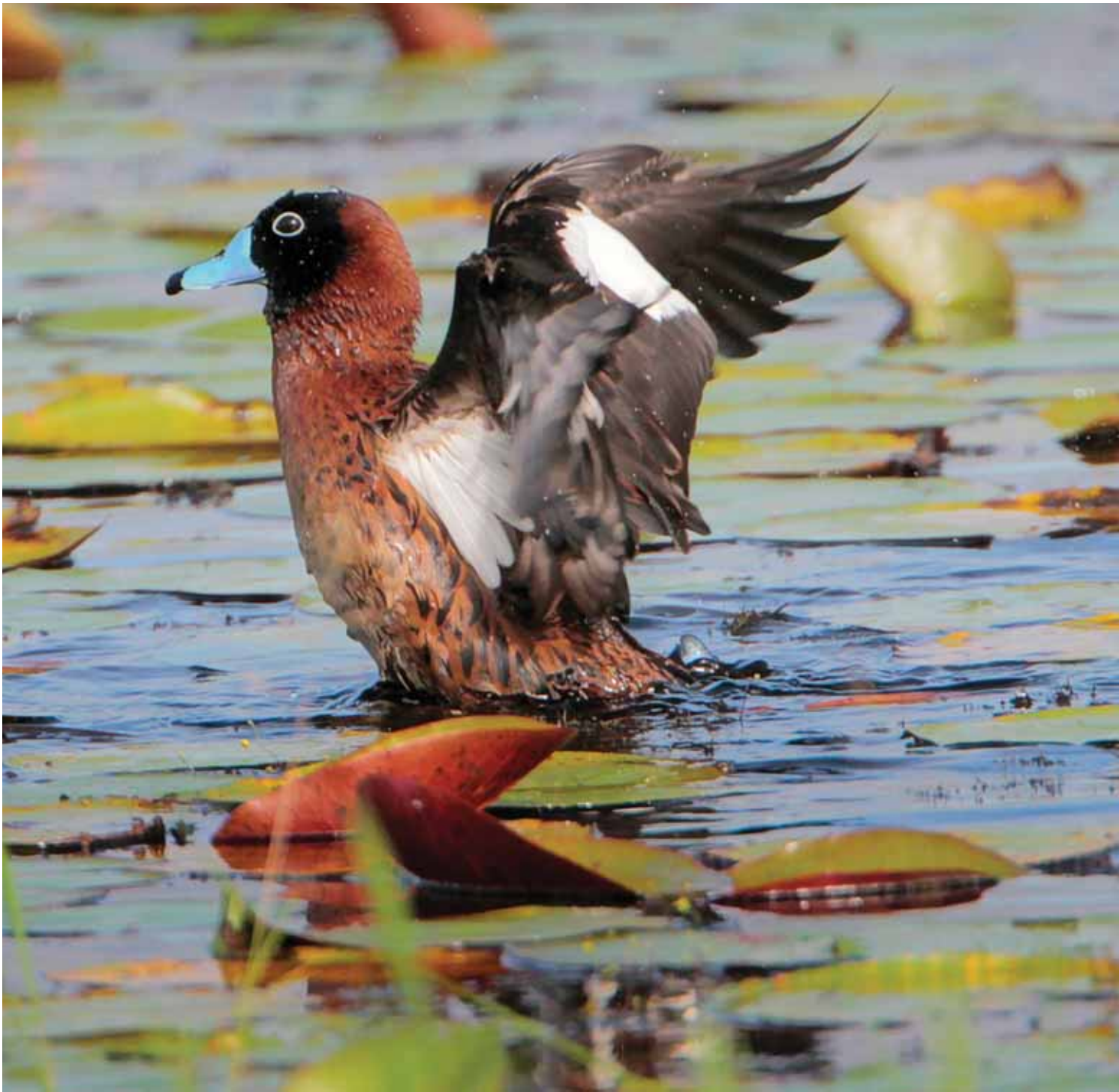
Nomonyx dominicus

In contrast to the Ruddy Duck, the tropical Masked Duck is a secretive species, sticking close to extremely dense emergent marsh habitats in all seasons. Averaging only 13.5" in body length, it is one of the smallest ducks in North America. It breeds in tropical lowlands of coastal Mexico, parts of Central America, the northern half of coastal South America, the Caribbean, and more recently, in southern Texas, where the first U.S. nesting report was recorded at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge in 1967. Throughout most of its known range, its status is categorized as "uncommon to rare, and local," with the exception of Cuba and Panama where it is considered "common and local."

That said, the Masked Duck has been known to wander widely but very erratically up into the eastern U.S., from Louisiana, Florida, and Georgia all the way up into New England. In Louisiana, the Masked Duck has been recorded on less than ten occasions, most of which have occurred in December-January in coastal parishes.

One of the most tantalizing Louisiana records, however, came on 03 April 1967 (the same year of the first U.S. nesting record in Texas) of a mixed group of five individuals on a marsh pond 10 miles south of Sulphur, LA in Calcasieu Parish. Three years later, waterfowl biologist John T. Lynch observed a pair of Masked Ducks exhibiting courtship display at an isolated marsh pond





near Holly Beach on the southwestern Louisiana coast. In hopes of confirming nesting in both of these spring sighting records, ornithologists immediately followed up the initial reports with multiple visits, but were not successful in relocating any of the birds.

By 1974 (Louisiana Birds) ornithologist George Lowery, Jr. wrote “On the basis of the Lynch observations,

I believe it [Masked Duck] will sooner or later be found to nest in southwestern Louisiana.” Forty years later, Louisiana has still not produced a Masked Duck nesting record. The last verified Masked Duck sighting in Louisiana occurred 22 years ago in Lafourche Parish, on 19 January, 1992.





The Sea Ducks

*T*he sea ducks are cold climate specialists, nesting in freshwater subarctic wetlands, but highly-adapted to lives in marine environments during the non-breeding season where they feed primarily on animal life such as mussels, clams, and other invertebrates. Red-breasted and Common mergansers occupy similar habitats, and feed primarily on fishes. The Hooded Merganser has adapted to a life in southern swamps.



Common Goldeneye

Bucephala clangula

The Common Goldeneye breeds throughout the boreal forests of the Northern Hemisphere. Interestingly, this diver is a cavity nester, selecting deciduous or evergreen trees near small lakes devoid of much shoreline vegetation. In treeless regions of Newfoundland, however, it is known to use rock cavities for nesting.

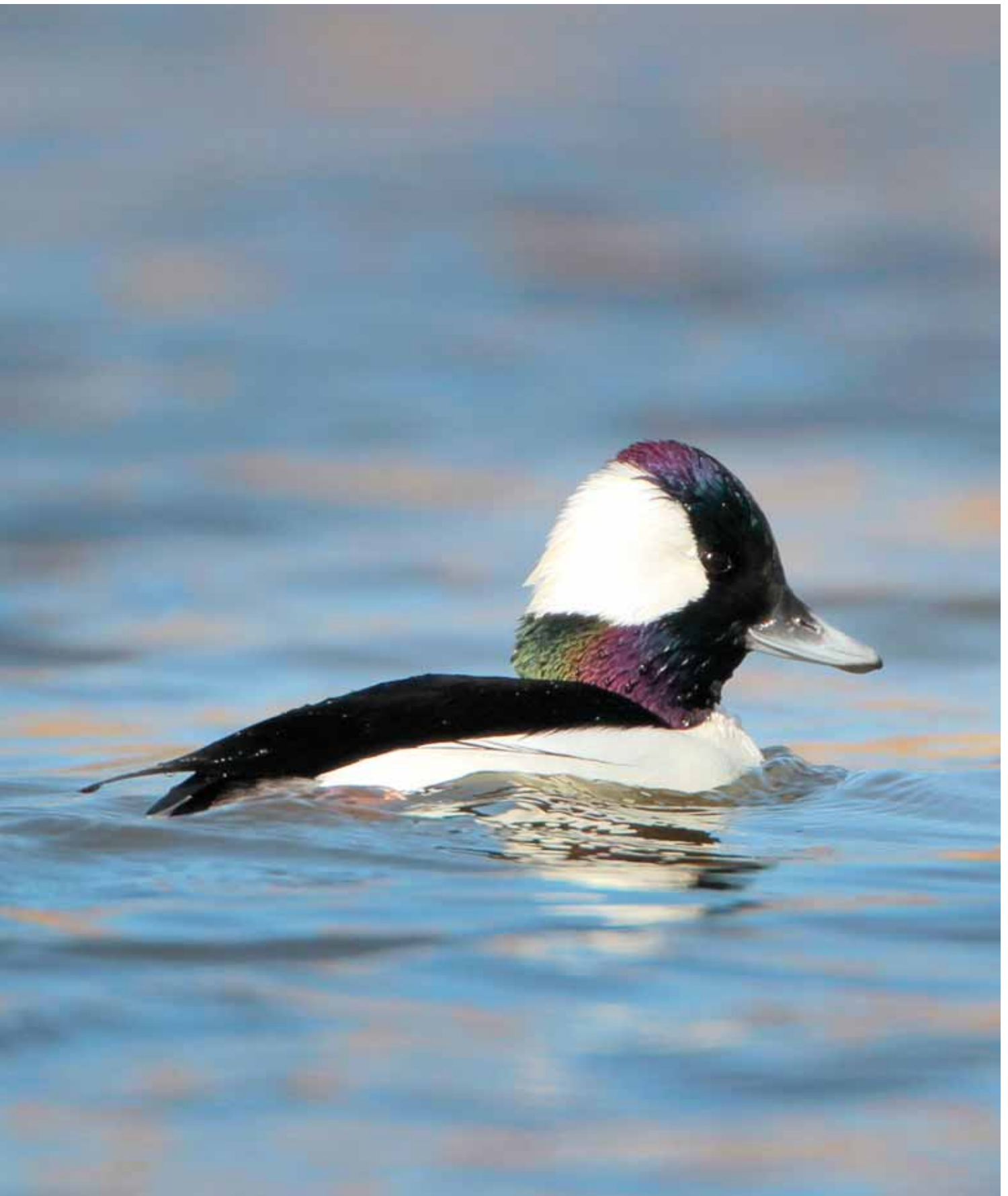
About the size of a Redhead or Greater Scaup, this medium-large diver possesses relatively short wings, and a short somewhat narrow bill, suited for a life of chasing aquatic invertebrates (insects, crustaceans, small mollusks) and small fishes. Though a diver, with feet and legs set well-aft, Common Goldeneyes are able to move about surprisingly well on land, with some reports of females leading broods from nest cavities to water for up to a mile overland.

As with most other duck species, female Common Goldeneyes are drab gray-brown in color, whereas the males show a predominance of white above and below, starkly outlined by black wings, tail, and blackish-green head.

During migration periods and winter months, the Common Goldeneyes of North America focus on large rivers, freshwater lakes and reservoirs from the Great Lakes southward through the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys to the Gulf Coast, as well as on marine bays and estuaries along the northern Atlantic and northern Pacific Coasts of the U.S.

In Louisiana, the Common Goldeneye occurs every winter, but never commonly so; and it spends the shortest amount of time here of any winter duck, arriving at the onset of winter – most often in late November – and usually departing before the end of February. Thus, it's always a treat to encounter a Common Goldeneye anywhere in the Bayou State. Traditionally, goldeneye sightings in Louisiana peak in late December or January from large lakes and reservoirs such as Lake Ponchartrain, Calcasieu Lake, Catahoula Lake, Toledo Bend Reservoir, Cross Lake, and Lake D'Arbonne.





Bufflehead

Bucephala albeola

Somewhat like a downsized version of a goldeneye in appearance, behavior and habit, the Bufflehead is endemic to North America. Like the Common Goldeneye, the Bufflehead is also a tree-cavity nester, mostly using abandoned Northern Flicker holes located near water in the boreal forests and parklands of Canada and Alaska.

Averaging a little over 13" in length – well-smaller than a King Rail – the Bufflehead is in a three-way tie along with the Green-winged Teal and Ruddy Duck as the smallest North American duck species. Generally, both the Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye possess lots of white plumage etched with black markings above and below, but size alone will separate the Bufflehead from the similar-looking Common Goldeneye. An additionally important differentiating factor lies in the position of the white facial spots on these two small-billed, dark-headed ducks: below and in front of the eye on the Common Goldeneye; behind the eye on the Bufflehead.

Food habits and habitat preferences between the Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye are nearly identical, with the Bufflehead preying on aquatic insects, crustaceans,

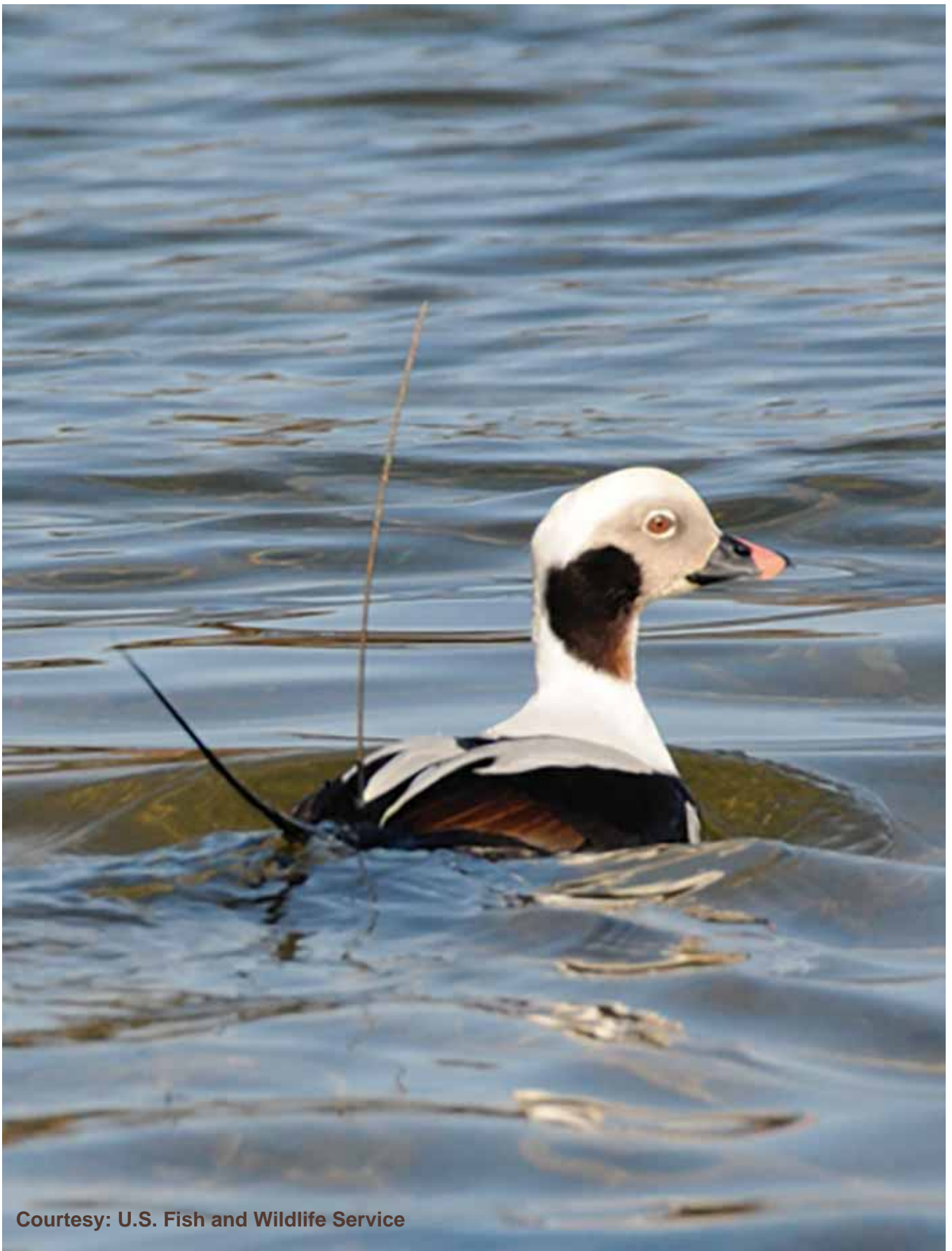
mollusks, and fishes in relatively deep, clear waters.

Like the Common Goldeneye, the Bufflehead is most attracted to the Great Lakes and to the marine bays and estuaries of the U.S. for its primary wintering grounds. However, the smaller, more agile Bufflehead is more apt to turn up in all manner of smaller ponds, lakes, and reservoirs across the entire southern U.S. as well.

Back in the early 20th century, ornithologist Harry C. Oberholser (*Bird Life of Louisiana*, 1938) considered the Bufflehead to be a rare winter visitor in Louisiana. Today, the Bufflehead is a substantially more common winter visitor than the Common Goldeneye, with many annual statewide reports of the former, compared to a mere handful each winter of the latter.

Traditional winter locales for Louisiana Buffleheads are again quite similar to that of the Common Goldeneye, with large, clear-water lakes and reservoirs (Lake Ponchartrain, Calcasieu Lake, Catahoula Lake, Toledo Bend Reservoir, Cross Lake, D'Arbonne Lake) preferred; although the Bufflehead also turns up in the open waters of smaller rivers and oxbow lakes.





Courtesy: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Long-tailed Duck

Clangula hyemalis

Like the Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead, the Long-tailed Duck formerly the “Oldsquaw”) is yet another sea duck featuring bold, “white-etched-with-black” plumage, but the male also possesses an exceedingly long tail – much like the Northern Pintail, only longer. This mid-sized, small-billed diver is a true arctic species, breeding in tundra and tiaga wetlands across the entire Northern Hemisphere.

The Long-tailed Duck is the champion of all North American diving ducks, consistently foraging at depths of 15-45’ – but with records of 150’ or more in Lake Michigan! On its arctic and sub-arctic breeding grounds it focuses on aquatic insects, small crustaceans, and fish roe. In migration and winter it broadens its diet to include small mollusks, fishes, and benthic worms.

In winter, Long-tailed Ducks concentrate in large, open, northern waters including the Aleutian Island chain off Alaska southward through coastal Vancouver, the Great Lakes, and along the northern Atlantic Coast of the U.S. and Canada. Even so, this duck wanders

widely across most of the U.S. and Canada, with records routinely scattered across western Canada and throughout the entire U.S., including a substantial number of annual winter records throughout the Gulf Coast.

From the late 19th century through the early 1940s, the Long-tailed Duck was considered to be of casual (e.g. irregular) winter occurrence in Louisiana. But, then records began piling up. By the mid-1950s Louisiana ornithologist George Lowery, Jr. declared it a regularly-occurring “rare to uncommon” species.

Presently, a half-dozen or more Long-tailed Ducks are recorded each winter in Louisiana, with sightings emanating from large interior lakes and reservoirs as well as from large coastal lakes and bays – but only rarely from the nearshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico itself. One of the most unusual recent Louisiana records involved an individual which hung around for quite a while in a roadside ditch along LA 82 just east of the Holly Beach community in Cameron Parish.



Courtesy: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Surf Scoter

Melanitta perspicillata

The Scoters

Because they are not considered game birds, the cold-water-loving scoters have received comparatively little scientific study. The scoters are all somewhat large, dark-colored, oceanic diving ducks featuring stout, heavy, conspicuously-knobbed bills adapted for hunting mollusks and other aquatic invertebrates. Three species occur worldwide, all of which breed in North America, and all of which visit Louisiana in small numbers each winter, where they are much appreciated by birders eager to add them to their “life lists.”

Not only are they all the same size, but the males of all three scoter species are black, and the females drab-brown. Thus it becomes necessary for duck identification students to familiarize themselves with the relative shapes, sizes, and color patterns associated with each species’ bill, face, and head.

The Surf Scoter is the most commonly recorded scoter in Louisiana, with records annually stretching into the first week of June. Beyond the coast itself, this species is also recorded from larger inland lakes.

Though indigenous to North America, the Surf Scoter is considered to be one of the least-studied of all North American duck species. Its breeding territory through Alaska and Canada is very spotty and confined to the margins and islands of open, shallow, freshwater lakes featuring rocky shorelines with little or no aquatic emergent vegetation. To date, relatively few nests have been observed, and those that have were most often located on the ground below low branches of evergreen trees or in cavities below the roots of wind-thrown trees.

In winter, Surf Scoters tend to concentrate along the bays and estuaries of the Pacific and Atlantic Coasts of the U.S., but many are recorded each year throughout the interior U.S. and Canada, including much of the Gulf Coast.

Louisiana’s first Surf Scoter record came on 20 March 1890 from Bayou St. John in New Orleans, but 70 years would pass before it was recorded again. Since 1960, though, sightings have picked up dramatically, with a substantial number occurring annually throughout our coastal lakes and estuaries, especially along the southwestern coast in Cameron Parish.





Black Scoter

Melanitta americana

The Black Scoter breeds primarily in North America in two widely disjunct populations; one in subarctic Alaska and the other in eastern Canada from northern Ontario and Quebec through Newfoundland and Labrador. Like the Surf Scoter, the Black Scoter prefers the rocky margins of open, shallow lakes featuring little if any aquatic emergent vegetation. Its prey menu is comprised of 90% animal life including aquatic insects and small crustaceans, and in salt water, mollusks.

The Black Scoter's wintering range is entirely comparable to that of the Surf Scoter, covering both the Pacific and Atlantic coastal waters of the U.S. and Canada, especially in water with temperatures of 50F or lower. Each winter small numbers are also detected in larger open-water lakes throughout interior U.S. and Canada, as well as in bays, estuaries, and coastal lakes of the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Of the three North American scoter species, the Black Scoter possesses the most "dabbling duck-like" appearance,

featuring a gently-rounded crown, a fairly steep angle between forehead and bill base, and a medium-sized evenly-tapered bill. Female Black Scoters feature a rather sharp facial demarcation between a very dark-brown or blackish crown and very pale light-buff cheeks.

As with the other two scoter species, the Black Scoter was considered an "accidental" species in Louisiana (five or fewer total records) until 1960, though one of those sightings involved a flock of 75 individuals encountered just offshore of the Holly Beach community in Cameron Parish on 15 April 1938. Louisiana sightings of the Black Scoter have substantially increased from 1960 through the present, and include not only all of the coastal parishes, but also all of southeastern Louisiana's Mississippi River parishes from West Feliciana down through Saint Bernard and Plaquemines at the mouth of the river. The most notable inland record comes from Natchitoches Parish's Sibley Lake in northwestern Louisiana in late spring of 1970.

White-winged Scoter

Melanitta fusca

All ages and sexes of the aptly-named White-winged Scoter possess a white wing patch along the secondary wing feathers, which, with patience, can usually be discerned via spotting scope, even from great distances. Moreover, this species' crown is flattened, and its forehead slopes seamlessly into a long, prominent bill, resulting in a rather unique head profile, much like that of the Canvasback.

Duck biologists know considerably more about the White-winged Scoter compared to the other two scoter species, mainly because its nests and nesting grounds are more accessible, stretching from interior Alaska all the way south through the boreal forest wetlands of southern British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. Nesting site preference includes dense, thorny shrub-scrub habitats associated with the margins and islands of shallow lakes.

Like the other scoter species, the White-winged's food choices are primarily of animal matter – aquatic insects

and crustaceans in breeding season and mollusks in spring, fall, and winter. It winters along both the Pacific and Atlantic coastlines of North America, but is decidedly rare anywhere south of Chesapeake Bay on the Atlantic side. As with the other scoters, small numbers of White-wingeds routinely turn up in larger open lakes throughout the interior of the U.S. all the way south to the Gulf Coast. The White-winged Scoter turns up annually in Louisiana, but on average fewer are recorded each winter compared to the Surf and Black scoters. Historically, Louisiana sightings are more concentrated in the coastal parishes, yet a number of historical records exist from large inland lakes in Calcasieu, Pointe Coupee, Caddo, and St. Tammany parishes. The harsh winter of 2013-14 will always be remembered for the plethora of White-winged Scoter reports emanating from lakes and reservoirs in all portions of our state, including from previously unrecorded parishes such as Union, Rapides, and St. Martin.





King Eider

Somateria spectabilis

The King Eider breeds along tundra ponds and rocky shorelines of arctic lakes in far-northern Alaska and Canada. Its usual wintering grounds are in the Bering Sea in the west and off the coasts of Labrador, Newfoundland and Greenland in the east, but also include coastal Atlantic and Pacific waters as far south as New York and California.

About Mallard-sized, the male of this species possesses a curiously-swollen but highly ornate lobe to the base of its bill. King Eiders are powerful divers and underwater swimmers, diving to depths of 45-75' deep to search for winter foods such as mollusks, crustaceans, and echinoderms. Satellite telemetry readings on diving King Eiders off of the western coast of Greenland indicated diving to depths of about 130'!

Of North America's four eider species, the King Eider tends to wander farthest south during the non-breeding

season. On rare occasions it has been documented in the interior of Canada and the U.S. from the Prairie Provinces down through the Great Plains and even onto the northern Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana.

The King Eider is the only eider species ever recorded in Louisiana, and it was not until late spring of 1994 that our first bird was documented, a sub-adult male that was observed for over a month (09 April – 18 May) in Barataria Bay, just north of Grand Terre Island (Jefferson Parish). Less than a month later (11 June 1994) a female King Eider was recorded from Breton National Wildlife Refuge on the Chandeleur Island chain off of the southeastern coast of Louisiana in Saint Bernard Parish. The third and final King Eider sighting to date in Louisiana, that of a male encountered on 31 May 2001, came from Breton NWR as well.

Hooded Merganser

Lophodytes cucullatus

The Mergansers

North America's three merganser species possess thin, elongate bills in which the lamellae – the tiny ridges along the inside edges of a duck's bill – have evolved into sharp saw-tooth-like projections to better grip fishes and other aquatic animals. As with most other divers, mergansers are comparatively shorter-winged, resulting in a trademark rapid/shallow wingbeat. In body shape, structure, posture, and locomotion, both in the air and on the water, mergansers more resemble loons than other ducks. Two merganser species, the Common Merganser and the Red-breasted Merganser, are much like the other sea ducks in appearance, behavior, and habitat preferences; whereas the third species, the Hooded Merganser, has adapted to life in lower-latitude, swampy habitats.

The Hooded Merganser is the smallest of the mergansers, a bit shorter in body length and wingspan than the Wood Duck. Like the Wood Duck, the Hooded Merganser is a swamp-dwelling, tree hole-nesting duck, endemic to the North American continent. It breeds in forested wetlands of the Pacific Northwest and throughout much of eastern North America, with highest populations concentrated in the Great Lakes region.

During the winter months some Hooded Mergansers remain in the northern portions of their breeding range, but most move south into the Gulf Coast and spottily across the western U.S. from Texas to California.

Unlike the other two merganser species, which are primarily piscivorous, the Hooded Merganser exhibits a more diverse diet that includes aquatic insects and crustaceans – especially crawfish. Thus, it's easy to understand how this species has come to be so well-adapted to the cypress-tupelo swamps of Louisiana! Yet it's difficult to ascertain whether Hooded Merganser nesting in the Bayou State is a recent development or if it has been occurring all along – only in very modest numbers.

Back in the early part of the 20th century, when (apparently) no official nest records were on file for this species in Louisiana, ornithologist Harry Oberholser characterized the Hooded Merganser as no more than a “rare winter resident,” concluding, “[Ornithologists] George E. Beyer, Andrew Allison, and H. H. Kopman are authority for the statement that this merganser breeds in the state, and that young have been seen in June. Robert Butler also reports it breeding in West Feliciana parish.”

By the mid-1950s ornithologist George Lowery, Jr. had upgraded the Hooded Merganser's Louisiana status to “a moderately common winter resident and uncommon breeder,” but lamented the fact that not a single state record existed for the July-October period, “despite the fact that the species is known to breed in the state.”

By the advent of the 21st century, ornithologists



David Wiedenfeld and Mark Swan (Louisiana Breeding Bird Atlas, 2000) confirmed about a dozen instances of breeding Hooded Merganser in Louisiana, spread out over eight parishes within the Mississippi and Red River

floodplains, mentioning that most nests were located in artificial Wood Duck nest boxes.

Common Merganser

Mergus merganser

In contrast to the modest-sized Hooded Merganser, the Common Merganser is the largest North American duck, averaging nearly two-feet in length and weighing in at 3.4 lbs. This large diver nests in northerly latitudes throughout the Northern Hemisphere in tree cavities and rock crevices – even in abandoned buildings and burrows – near large lakes and rivers.

In North America its breeding range is vast, stretching from southern Alaska southward through northern California and east through the northern Rockies, Great Lakes, and just about all of Canada. Like the Hooded Merganser, Common Goldeneye, and Bufflehead, its preferred breeding habitat is in wetlands associated with boreal forests.

In winter the Common Merganser seeks large lakes, reservoirs, and rivers throughout most of the U.S. exclusive of the Gulf Coast states. It prefers freshwater habitats, but will settle into marine bays and estuaries whenever and wherever opportunities (good fish stocks) present themselves. For its size, swimming power, and underwater agility, the Common Merganser's favorite fishing depths are surprisingly shallow, averaging less than 10 feet.

Primarily a fish-eater, but essentially an omnivore, the Common Merganser has been documented preying upon aquatic insects, crustaceans, mollusks, freshwater sponges, frogs, small mammals, and even birds! Due to its position at the very top of the aquatic food chain, the Common Merganser has long been used as a bioindicator species for



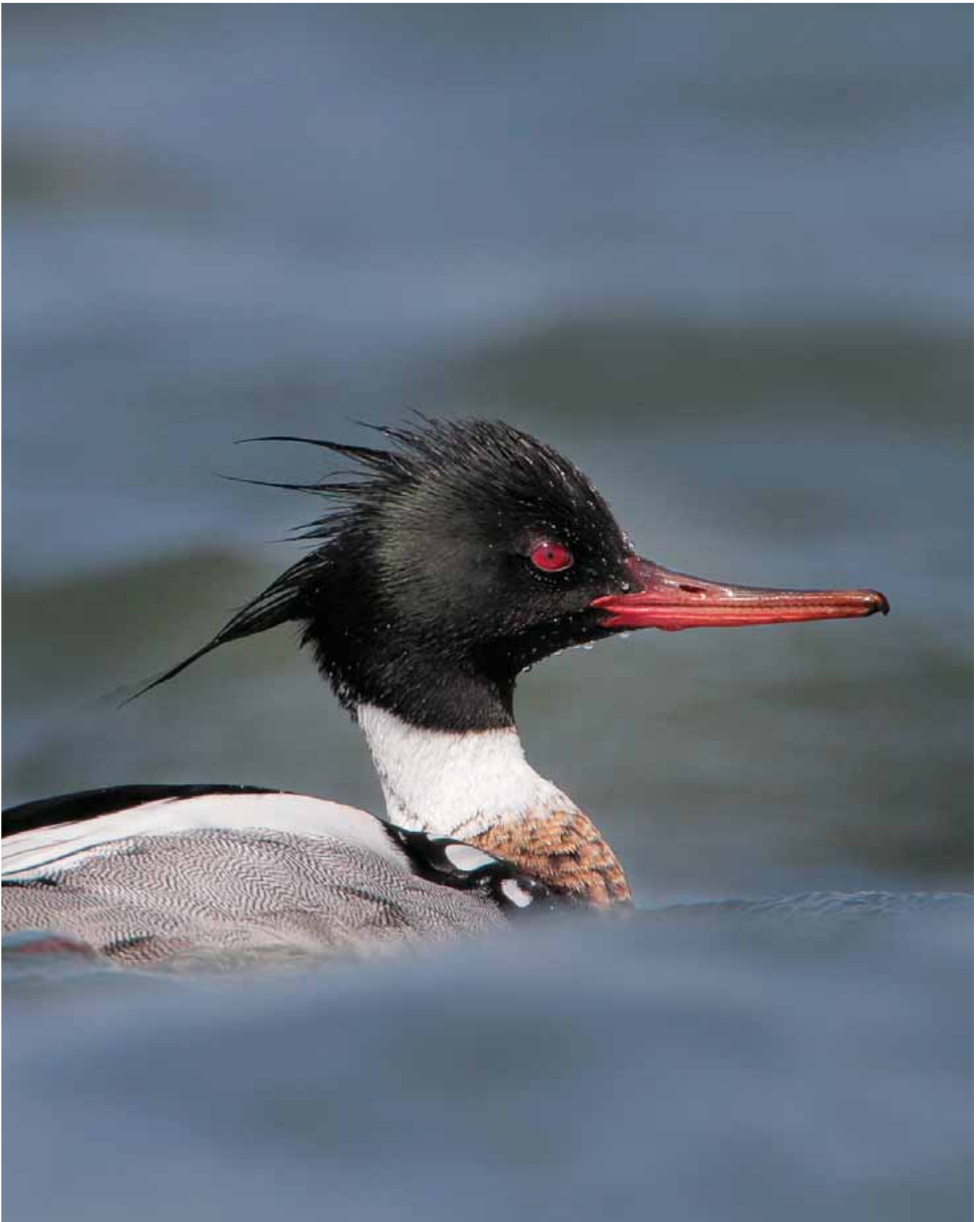


measuring pesticide and toxic metal accumulations.

In Louisiana – as with all Gulf Coastal states – the Common Merganser is a rare and irregular winter visitor, with only about 40 total records documented for the state. Interestingly, all but one of these documented records have involved female birds, which are so similar in appearance to female Red-breasted Mergansers that they can only be differentiated in the field by experienced observers using lots of caution and patience. Thus it is possible that any number of the older “sight records” might be erroneous. Fortunately, the most recently submitted records from

Terrebonne and Union parishes have been accompanied by beautiful photos.

Over half of Louisiana’s Common Merganser sightings have come from freshwater to brackish habitats, with multiple reports coming from Cross Lake (Caddo Parish), False River (Pointe Coupee Parish), University Lake (East Baton Rouge Parish), Lake Ponchartrain (Orleans/St. Tammany parishes), and Calcasieu Lake (Calcasieu Parish).



Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator

The Red-breasted Merganser is a common winter visitor to Louisiana, especially within the protected bays, estuaries, and lakes along our coast. Inland observations of transient individuals are also fairly common during spring and fall migration. Because it is more common here than the Common Merganser, and even the breeding Hooded Merganser, it is probably the Red-breasted Merganser which Louisiana French-speakers first nicknamed, *bec-scie* (“sawbill”).

Similar to the Common Merganser in appearance, distribution range, and behavior, the Red-breasted Merganser, differs only in its strong predilection for marine environments during the non-breeding season. This species is a ground-nester around both freshwater and marine wetlands in tundra and boreal forest habitats throughout Alaska and most of Canada. During the winter months it removes to the Great Lakes and to the coastal waters of much of the North American continent, northern Mexico included.

Among all ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers are

certainly one of the swiftest fliers. On the wing, their flight profile truly takes the term “streamlined” to its limits, often appearing as no more than a dark-and-white horizontal line of color zipping effortlessly just above the water’s surface.

Red-breasteds are primarily fish-eaters, chasing them sub-surface in relatively shallow waters. Like savvy human fishermen, they often cue in on gull activity in order to find fish. Like white pelicans and cormorants, Red-breasted Mergansers have been frequently documented in cooperatively herding fish in order to concentrate them for easier hunting.

Tolerant of other bird species, and gregarious in nature, the Red-breasted Merganser can be often found mixed in with other diving ducks and even other waterbirds such as cormorants and loons. Likewise, most duck species are known to be very territorial in breeding behavior, but there are records of Red-breasted Mergansers nesting amidst tens of thousands of terns and gulls.





Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks

Duck Conservation

By the end of the 19th century, biologists and other interested parties recognized that ducks were being over-harvested by “market hunters,” and by 1900 the Lacey Act, prohibiting commercial trade in all forms of wildlife was passed. In 1918 the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibited the over-harvest of ducks and all other migratory birds by sport hunters, establishing discrete hunting seasons with specified bag limits for various species of migratory game birds. In 1929 the Migratory Bird Conservation Act was passed, authorizing the acquisition of lands for the express purpose of conserving migratory birds by the U.S. Department of the Interior. With the passage of the Duck Stamp Act of 1934, the Department was authorized to begin acquiring lands for the establishment of the National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) system.

Private citizens were stirred into waterfowl conservation action in the aftermath of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, when millions of acres of farmland and duck nesting habitat in the Great Plains of the U.S. and Canada were laid to waste. Delta Waterfowl, a northern plains duck conservation group founded in 1911, hired its first scientific director in 1938, and duck ecology studies began in earnest. Delta Waterfowl is still active in waterfowl conservation studies and activities today, initiating conservation services such as the Alternative Land Use Program for farmers and other private landowners, Adopt-A-Pothole, Hen Houses, the Waterfowl Heritage Fund, and more.

Ducks Unlimited, another waterfowl conservation

group formed by private citizens, traces its beginnings to the post-Dust Bowl year of 1937. Dedicated to the acquisition of not only waterfowl breeding habitat in the Northern Plains but also waterfowl wintering habitat elsewhere in North America, Ducks Unlimited has conserved over 11 million acres to date in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. In Louisiana, winter home for a substantial portion of North America’s waterfowl population, Ducks Unlimited has acquired nearly 400,000 acres of wetland habitat at a cost of over \$80 million.

Despite all these measures North America’s waterfowl population numbers continued to drop amidst an onslaught of habitat loss and chemical pollution. By the latter part of the 20th century – when over half of the continent’s wetlands had been destroyed, and the population of most duck species were plummeting – the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service initiated the North American Waterfowl Conservation Plan (NAWCP). Several years later Congress passed the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), authorizing matching grants for the acquisition of more habitat.

Eventually, NAWCP spawned the Joint Venture Program, calling for self-directed partnerships of government agencies, private organizations, corporations, and individuals to tackle habitat conservation issues. The North American continent was divided into 18 habitat regions, with each developing its own set of plans, objectives, and goals. Coastal Louisiana was put into the Gulf Coast Joint Venture, with the remainder of the state

put into the Lower Mississippi Valley Joint Venture. To date, North America's Joint Ventures have facilitated over 5,700 partners in securing about \$7.5 billion in funds to preserve, restore or enhance over 22 million acres of wetland waterfowl habitat in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico.

At about the same time that NAWCP and NAWCA were initiated, the U.S. Department of Agriculture became involved in providing farmers and other private landowners with opportunities to protect, restore, and enhance wildlife habitat located on their properties via the Conservation Reserve Program. By 1990, the Department added special benefits for wetland habitat conservation via a sister program known as the Wetlands Reserve Program – known today as the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program. This program is periodically reauthorized through the USDA's Farm Bill, and provides funding and technical assistance (via the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service biologists) to farmers and land managers for the express purpose of conserving wetland habitats on their properties.

With the late-20th century additions of these high-impact wetlands conservation programs and initiatives to those organizations and programs which were already – and still are – in place, the outlook for North America's waterfowl populations has brightened considerably. Today most waterfowl species populations are recovering and presently secure as a result.



Northern Pintail



What You Can Do

Educate yourself! Become aware of the efforts of conservation organizations that help protect and manage Louisiana's wild habitats and the waterfowl that rely on them.

Keep your cats indoors and make sure that they are spayed or neutered! Each year it is estimated that cats kill hundreds of millions of birds.

Avoid nesting ducks. If possible, join local efforts or initiate your own that establish and install duck boxes in appropriate habitats. Remember, position duck boxes out of view from one another. This is important particularly for Wood Ducks as they are known to "dump nest" in boxes that are too close together.

Apply affective techniques that prevent birds from flying into your glass windows both at home and at work. It is estimated that hundreds of millions of birds die annually by flying into plate glass windows. This is particularly the case when habitat is reflected by large panes of glass, or when transparent glass allows views of habitat on the other side of a building or home.

Participate in local Christmas Bird Counts! Each year around Christmas, many small groups of people at the local level join in the counting of birds over a one day period. Much of our understanding about bird distribution particularly in winter comes from these efforts.

Help with habitat restoration! Several of the organizations below have volunteer corps that help make the numerous projects initiated each year a success. These

organizations are always looking for new volunteers.

For more information on what conservation organizations and government agencies are doing to protect birds or how you might get involved, visit the following websites:

Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program
www.btne.org 800 259-0869

Louisiana Ornithological Society
www.losbird.org

Louisiana Bird Resource Center
www.lsu.edu/science/birdoffice

Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries
<http://wlf.la.gov> 800 256-2749

Louisiana Wildlife Federation
www.lawildlifefed.org 225 344-6707

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory
www.gcbo.org 979 480-0999

American Bird Conservancy
www.abcbirds.org 888 247-3624

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
www.fws.gov/birds

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
1-800-442-2511

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1-337-291-3114

Become a volunteer and help with coastal restoration or bird habitat restoration/monitoring programs. The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program maintains a volunteer program and is always looking for new members. Call us at 800 259-0869 or visit the web site <http://volunteer.btne.org/>



Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

