

Duck, Duck, Goose!

Written by: Jay Kaplan, Roaring Brook Nature Center.

The month of March is the start of the spring bird migration, and some of the first birds to begin moving north from the southern wintering grounds are the waterfowl – ducks, geese and swans. As the ice retreats from our rivers, lakes, and ponds, these birds fly north to the breeding grounds where they will nest and lay their eggs. Some species like wood ducks and mallards nest right here in Connecticut, while others continue northwards, some all the way to the Arctic.

DID YOU KNOW

There are over 30 species of ducks that can be seen in Connecticut during the year. Some can be seen only on Long Island Sound during the winter months, while others nest in ponds throughout the state.

Some ducks are “dabblers,” feeding at the surface by putting their heads into the water, tipping up their bodies, and straining small plants and animals from the water with their flat, spoon-like bills. Others are “divers,” swimming down beneath the surface to pull plants or catch small fish and other small, aquatic animals. Dabblers have their legs at the center of their bodies, while divers generally have larger feet, and their legs are positioned towards the tail.

In most species of ducks, the males are more colorful than the females to help in attracting a mate. The female’s colors are muted, so that they can camouflage themselves while sitting on the nest and protect the eggs from predators.

Young ducklings are precocial. They spend more time in the egg than do songbirds, and so, they are more fully developed when they hatch. They can run, swim and feed themselves right after hatching. They still need the mother for protection, as they cannot fly.

Ducks have an oil-producing gland that is used when they “preen” their feathers. During preening, ducks straighten and clean their feathers with their beak and cover their feathers with this oil. This waterproofs the feathers so they can remain in water for long periods even in the coldest weather.

LIFE CYCLES

All birds hatch from eggs, but do so in different ways. Songbirds like robins spend but two weeks in the egg. They are “altricial,” meaning when they hatch, they are blind, have no feathers and must depend upon their parents to feed them and keep them warm. Chickens, shorebirds and waterfowl are “precocial.” They spend a longer period of time developing in the egg. Canada geese, for example, may spend up to thirty days in the egg. When they hatch, they are feathered and can run, swim and feed themselves within a day of hatching.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE between a DUCK AND A GOOSE?

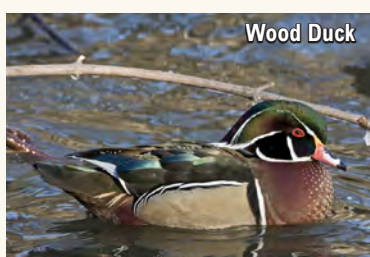


Photo by: Mark S. Szantyr

DUCK



Photo by: Mark S. Szantyr

GOOSE

Ducks and geese, as well as swans, are classified as waterfowl. Geese are generally larger than ducks. Scientists tell the difference between ducks and geese by the number of bones they have in their necks. Ducks have 16 or fewer neck bones, while geese (and swans), having longer necks, have between 17 and 24 neck bones

WATERFOWL MIGRATION

For North American birds, migration refers to the annual spring movement of birds from their wintering grounds in the south to their breeding grounds in the north, and their return southward in the fall. There are many theories about why birds migrate. Most involve a need for food and for longer days in which to raise their young. In the case of waterfowl, birds must find open water for food, and for protection from hungry predators. Here in Connecticut, most of our ponds, lakes and reservoirs freeze during the coldest months although there are places in the Hartford area where ducks can usually find open water. If it gets cold enough, even the larger rivers freeze, and ducks most move southward. Except in the coldest of winters, the lower Connecticut River and Long Island Sound do not freeze and ducks will overwinter there. A trip to a place like Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison may yield a wide variety of ducks and other water birds throughout the winter season. In spring, when the ice thaws, many ducks migrate north to northern New England and to Canada, some going as far as the Arctic. Others remain in Connecticut, seeking out small ponds, swamps and other aquatic habitats where they can nest and raise their young.

WHERE TO FIND WATERFOWL

This is a good time to look for waterfowl as they have not yet begun nesting. Look for ducks on any body of water from small ponds to large lakes and reservoirs; from streams to large rivers, and especially, along the Connecticut coastline. A pair of binoculars will help you to identify ducks that may be on the water a good distance away. If you are looking for places to view migrating waterfowl in the Hartford area, here are some of the many places you might go:

- Reservoir #6 off Albany Avenue in West Hartford
- Batterson Pond; boat launch area in New Britain
- Farmington Avenue Reservoir off Route 4 (Farmington Avenue) near the West Hartford/Farmington Town Line.
- Farmington River Trail thru Collinsville (also used by bikers and walkers)
- Ferry Park, Rocky Hill (on the Connecticut River)
- Barnes Boat Launch, Enfield (on the Connecticut River)
- Union Pond, Manchester

HOW TO IDENTIFY WATERFOWL

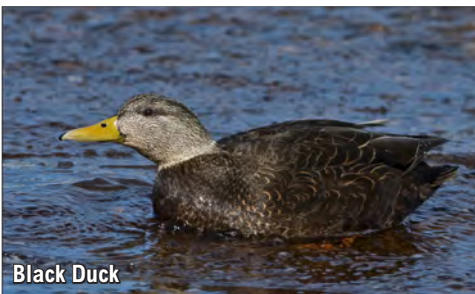
- Connecticut Birds (A Pocket Naturalist Guide) that fits into your pocket has color plates depicting many of Connecticut’s waterfowl as well as other species and where to find them.
- There are numerous field guides including the Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of eastern and central North America, The Sibley Field Guide to the Birds and others that will assist with waterfowl identification.
- Apps for your phone like Merlin Bird ID, published by the Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology allow for instant identification of birds in the field.
- The Hartford Audubon Society sponsors field trips throughout the year. (HartfordAudubon.org), Many of these field trips are to local areas, and are led by knowledgeable leaders.



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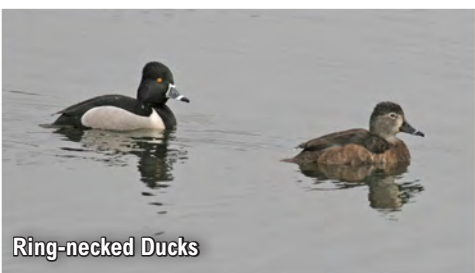
Black Duck



Common Eider



Wood Duck



Ring-necked Ducks



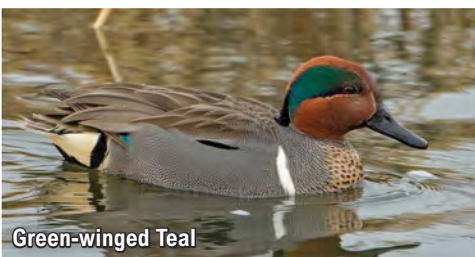
Northern Pintail



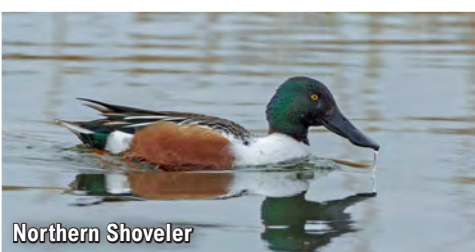
Gadwall



American Wigeon



Green-winged Teal



Northern Shoveler



Cracking Goose foreground

Canada Geese background

Photos by: Mark S. Szantyr
 CT Nature Photographer
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