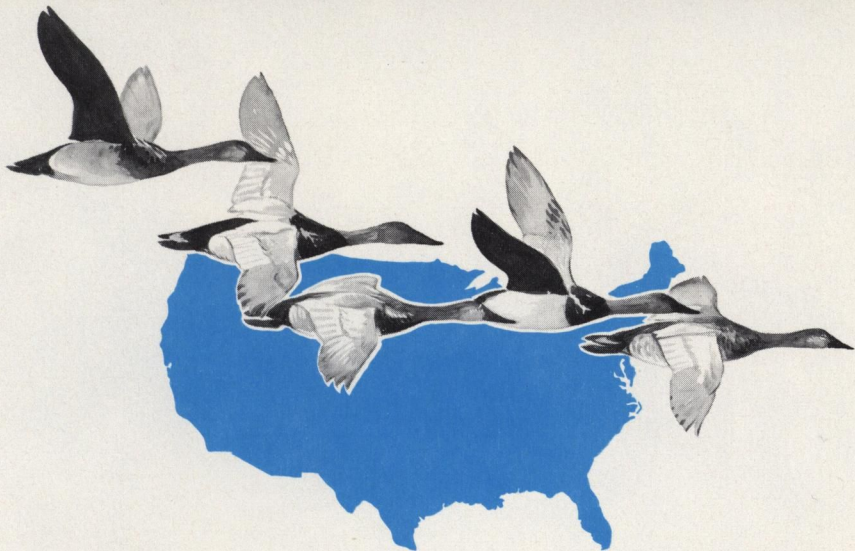


# DUCKS at a DISTANCE

*a waterfowl identification guide*

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
Fish and Wildlife Service





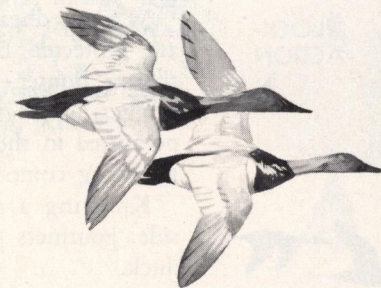
Created in 1849, the Department of the Interior—America's Department of Natural Resources—is concerned with the management, conservation, and development of the Nation's water, fish, wildlife, mineral, forest, and park and recreational resources. It also has major responsibilities for Indian and Territorial affairs.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department works to assure that nonrenewable resources are developed and used wisely, that park and recreational resources are conserved for the future, and that renewable resources make their full contribution to the progress, prosperity, and security of the United States—now and in the future.

# DUCKS at a DISTANCE

*a waterfowl identification guide*

by Bob Hines



## UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Stewart L. Udall, *Secretary*

Frank P. Briggs, *Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife*

## FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Clarence F. Pautzke, *Commissioner*

## BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

Daniel H. Janzen, *Director*

July 1963





HABITAT



FLOCK ACTION



SILHOUETTES



COLOR AREAS



SOUND

## IDENTIFICATION IS IMPORTANT

Identifying waterfowl gives many hours of satisfying recreation to millions of people. A camera can catch color and action of rare beauty. This guide will help you spot birds on the wing—it shows their color and plumage during the fall.

Knowing the species of ducks and geese can be rewarding to both hunters and birdwatchers. Ability increases with experience but even experts make mistakes—so don't be discouraged if progress seems slow at first.

When redheads or canvasbacks, or any other species, are protected because of their scarcity, it is essential that a hunter identify his target before he pulls the trigger. And when extra birds of certain species are permitted in the bag, hunters who know their ducks on the wing come out ahead.

Knowing a mallard from a merganser has another side: gourmets prefer the corn-fed greenhead to the fish duck.

There is an index to the ducks on the back cover. You can use it as a reference and also test yourself by trying to name each duck from its size, shape, and markings—for you'll have to learn to identify your species quickly on the wing.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Habitat, action, color, shape, and voice—all help distinguish one species from another.

Shallow marshes and creeks normally attract few divers; large, deep bodies of water are not usual feeding grounds of puddle ducks.

(Continued on page 23)

## PUDDLE DUCKS

Puddle ducks are typically birds of fresh, shallow marshes and rivers rather than of large lakes and bays. They are good divers, but usually feed by dabbling or tipping rather than submerging.

The speculum, or colored wing patch, is generally iridescent and bright, and often a telltale field mark.

Any ducks feeding in croplands will likely be puddle ducks, for most of this group are sure-footed and can walk and run well on land. Their food is mostly vegetable, and grain-fed mallards or pintails or acorn-fattened wood ducks are highly regarded.

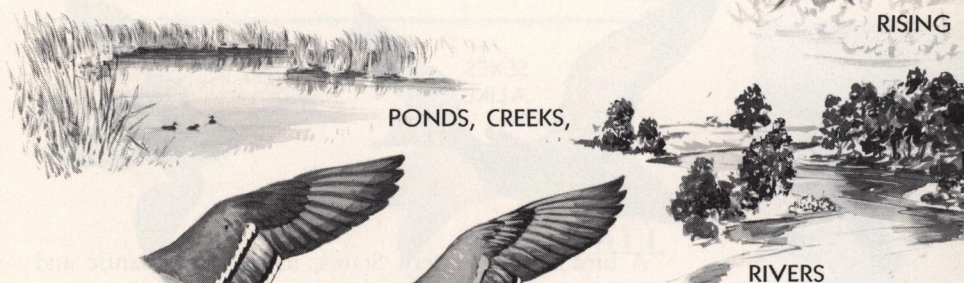
They ride higher in the water than divers, and launch themselves directly upward when rising, whether from land or water.



FEEDING



RISING



PONDS, CREEKS,

RIVERS

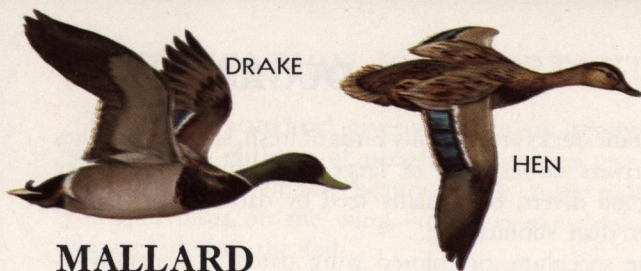
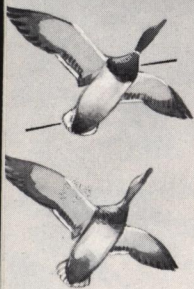


TYPICAL WINGS



CROPLANDS





## MALLARD

Most common duck. Extremely hardy, wintering as far north as it can find open water.

Flocks often leave the water in early morning and late afternoon to feed in nearby harvest fields, returning to marshes and creeks to spend the night.

The flight is not particularly rapid; voice of the hen is loud *quack*; of the drake, a lower-pitched *kwek-kwek*.



SEXES  
ALIKE

## BLACK DUCK

A bird of the eastern States, using the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways.

Shy and wary, regarded as the wariest of all ducks.

Often seen in company of mallards, but along the Atlantic coast frequents the salt marshes and the ocean much more than mallards.

Flight is swift; usually small flocks, in V's or angular lines.

Voice is duplicate of mallards.

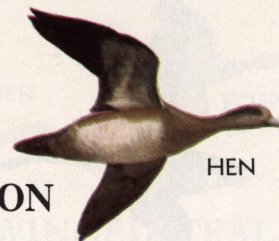


DRAKE



## WIDGEON

HEN



Nervous birds, quick to take alarm. Agile fliers, usually in compact flocks. Flight is fast, irregular, with many twists and turns. White belly and forewing very conspicuous in the air.

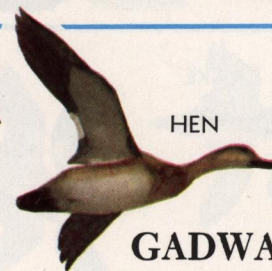
When feeding, often accompanies diving ducks and robs them of food brought up from depths beyond the widgeon's capability.

Drakes *whistle*; hens utter a loud *kaow* and a lower *qua-awk*.



DRAKE

HEN



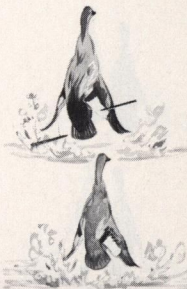
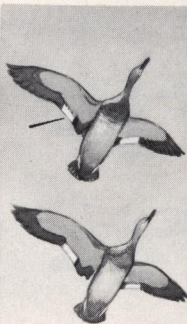
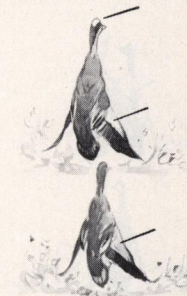
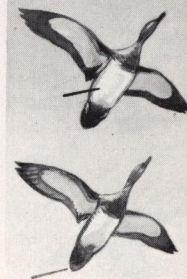
## GADWALL

Not plentiful anywhere; greatest numbers in the Central flyway, fewest in the Atlantic flyway.

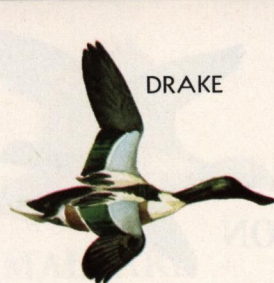
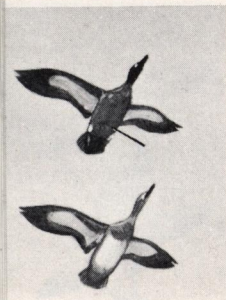
The only puddle duck with white in the speculum.

Small, compact flocks fly swiftly, usually in a direct line. Wingbeats are rapid.

Drakes *whistle* and *kack-kack*; hens *quack* like a mallard hen, but softer.







DRAKE



HEN

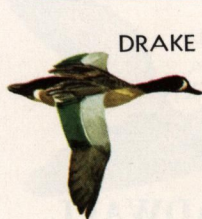
## SHOVELER

Early fall migrant; usual flight is steady and direct. When startled, the small flocks fly erratically, twisting and turning like teal.

Greatest numbers occur in the Central and Pacific flyways.

Aquatic animal life forms a third of its diet.

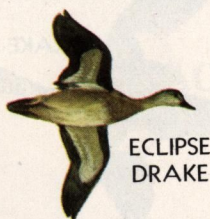
Drakes call *woh-woh* and *took-took*; hens have a feeble *quack*.



DRAKE



HEN

ECLIPSE  
DRAKE

## BLUE-WINGED TEAL

Very early migrant; the small, compact flocks fly swiftly, often low over marshes, twisting and dodging around trees and bushes. Twittering calls in flight are easily heard. Pale-blue forewing patch is the best field mark.

Drakes have a whistling *peep*; hens a faint *quack*.



DRAKE



HEN

ECLIPSE  
DRAKE

## GREEN-WINGED TEAL

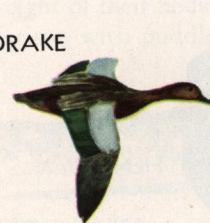
Quite hardy—some birds stay as far North as open water is found. Flight: sometimes in large flocks, always swift, erratic, all members twisting and circling as one unit.

Nests as far north as Alaska, migrates south through all four flyways.

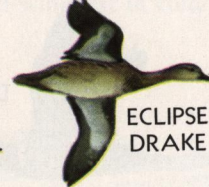
Drakes *whistle* and *twitter*; hens have a slight *quack*.



DRAKE



HEN

ECLIPSE  
DRAKE

## CINNAMON TEAL

Rare east of the Rocky Mountains.

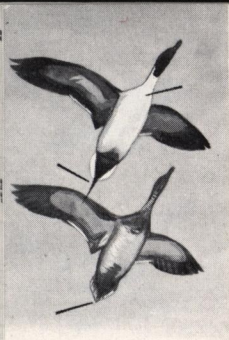
Flight characteristics like blue-wings, but usually there is only one family.

They are trusting, often slow to take alarm.

Unusually silent species: drakes have a low *chatter*; hens a faint *quack*.







DRAKE



HEN



## PINTAIL

Found in every flyway, most plentiful in the west. Extremely graceful, fast flier, fond of zig-zagging from great heights before leveling off for a landing. Equally agile on land; visits croplands to glean food. Drakes *whistle*; hens have a hoarse *quack*.



DRAKE



HEN



## WOOD DUCK

Found in all flyways; most numerous in the Mississippi flyway.

Frequents wooded streams and ponds; perches in trees. Flies through thick timber with speed and ease, and feeds readily on acorns, berries, and grapes on the forest floor.

Flight is swift and direct; flocks are usually small.

Drakes call *boo-w-ett*, often in flight; hens have a *cr-r-ek* when frightened.



## DIVING DUCKS

Diving ducks frequent the larger, deeper lakes and rivers, and coastal bays and inlets.

The colored wing patches of these birds lack the brilliance of the speculums of puddle ducks, but are still important field marks in most species. Since most of them have short tails, their huge, paddle feet may be used as rudders in flight, and are often visible on flying birds. When launching into flight, most of this group patter along the water before becoming airborne.

They feed by diving, often to considerable depths. To escape danger, they can travel great distances underwater, emerging only enough to show their head or bill tip before submerging again.

Their diets of fish, shellfish, mollusks, and aquatic plants make them second choice, as a group, for sportsmen. Canvasbacks and redheads fattened on eel grass or wild celery are notable exceptions.

Since their wings are small in proportion to the size and weight of their bodies, they have a rapid wingbeat in comparison with puddle ducks.



FEEDING



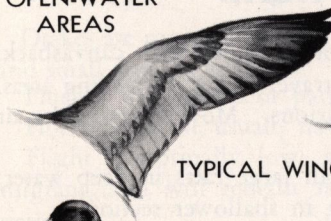
RISING



LANDING



OPEN-WATER AREAS



TYPICAL WINGS



PUDDLE DUCKS

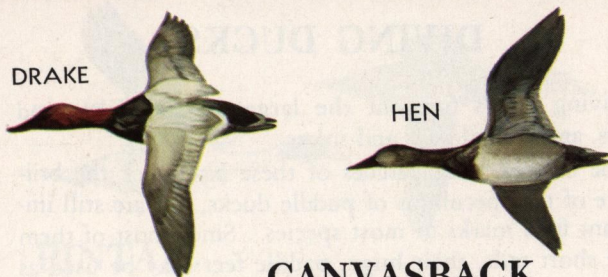
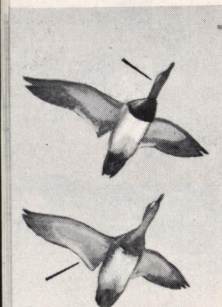
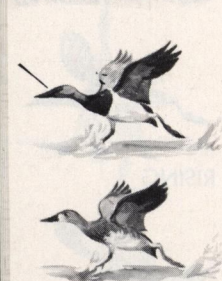
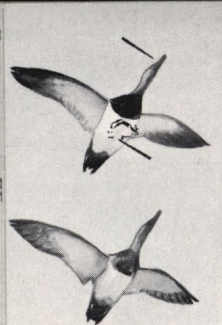


DIVING DUCKS



RUDDY ON LAND



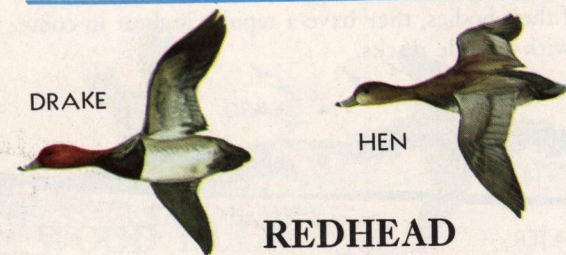


## CANVASBACK

Extremely powerful fliers, migrating in lines and irregular V's; in feeding areas, compact flocks fly in indefinite formation. Wingbeat is rapid and noisy. Normally late migrants.

On the water, body size and head shape distinguish them from scaups and redheads.

Drakes *croak*, *peep*, and *growl*; hens *quack*, similar to a mallard hen.



## REDHEAD

Ranges coast to coast, often found with canvasback. On migration, large flocks travel in V's; in feeding areas, flocks fly in irregular formations. Movements in the air always seem to be hurried.

Usually spends the day in large rafts in deep water; feeds morning and evening in shallower sections.

Drakes *purr* and *meow*; hens have a loud *squak*, higher than hen mallard's.



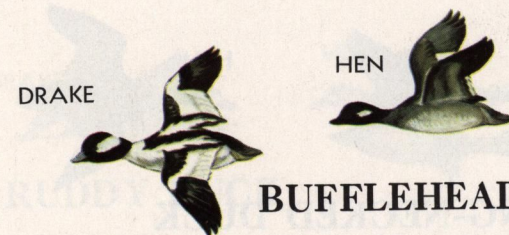
## COMMON GOLDENEYE

Distinctive wing-whistling sound in flight has earned the name of Whistlers.

Active, strong-winged fliers, moving in small flocks, often high in the air. Frequently rise in rapid spirals. Exceedingly wary. Large numbers winter on Great Lakes and both seacoasts.

Barrow's goldeneye, predominantly a westerner, differs mainly in the white crescent in front of the eye.

Drakes have a piercing *spee-speer*; hens a low *quack*. Both are usually quiet.



## BUFFLEHEAD

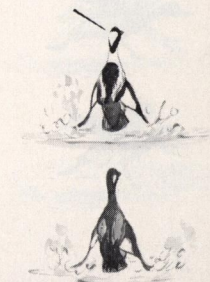
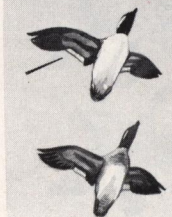
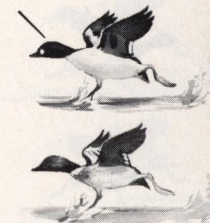
Drakes are conspicuous for their black and white design and small size.

Flushes straight up or patters along on water.

Flocks are small, usually mostly hens and young drakes.

Flight is normally low; wingbeat is rapid. A late migrant, and will remain as far north as open water permits.

Usually silent. Drakes *squeak*, and have a guttural note; hens *quack* weakly.







DRAKE



HEN



## LESSER SCAUP

Lively and restless on the water and in the air. Late migrants, often moving south just ahead of freeze up. On local flights, closely bunched flocks move erratically, twisting and turning often.

Easily confused with greater scaup. Best field mark is the light strip in the wings: short, half a wing length in the lesser scaup; longer, two-thirds the wing length, in the greater scaup.

Drakes *purr*; hens are usually silent.



DRAKE



HEN



## RING-NECKED DUCK

Faint brown ring on neck never shows in the field; light bands at tip and base of bill are conspicuous.

Up to a dozen in a flock fly in open formation; usually come directly into landing without circling.

Hens are easily confused with female redheads; absence of dark edge on speculum helps distinguish from hen scaup.

Drakes *purr*; hens are usually silent.



DRAKE



HEN



## GREATER SCAUP

Flock movement is rapid, in fairly compact formation; over feeding areas they normally fly under hundred-foot altitude. The wings produce a loud rustling sound.

Longer light strip showing through the wing is the best way to distinguish from the lesser scaup in the air.

Frequents the largest bodies of water, where it rafts up during the day.

Drakes utter a discordant *scaup, scaup*; hens are usually silent.



DRAKE



HEN



## RUDDY DUCK

This duck often swims away or dives rather than flushing.

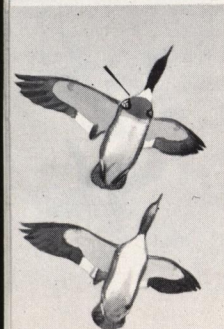
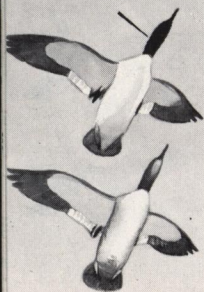
Rising from the water is awkward, seemingly with great effort. Once under way, the flight is sometimes jerky, noisy, and of uneven pace.

Winter flocks are found in coastal areas, both salt and fresh water, from the Chesapeake Bay south, along the Rio Grande, and on the west coast.

These birds are silent in the fall.







DRAKE



HEN

## COMMON MERGANSER

Strong fliers; the flight is swift and direct, low over the water, often in "follow the leader" line.

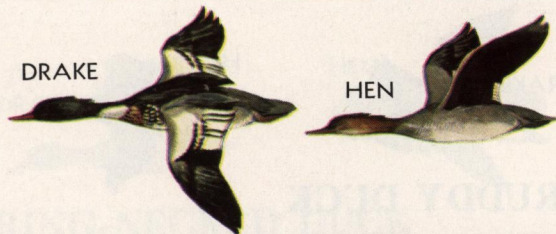
A very large duck; drakes show more white than any other species.

Winters from ice-free water in the north to the coastal waters of the Southern States.

The only call seems to be a startled *croak*.



DRAKE



HEN

## RED-BREASTED MERGANSER

Flight is very similar to common mergansers, but drakes show far less conspicuous white.

Juveniles and many adult drakes resemble hens during migration, for adult males grow out of eclipse plumage late.

Winters principally along both coasts, as well as Gulf of Mexico.

Voice; *croaks*, seldom heard.



DRAKE



HEN

## HOODED MERGANSER

Often seen in pairs, or very small flocks. The birds are graceful fliers, give an impression of great speed.

Flushes straight up or patters along on water.

Wingstrokes are short, rapid; the wings appear to blur.

Seldom goes to salt water; wintering grounds are the inland waters in all coastal States.

Only call is a series of coarse *grunts*.

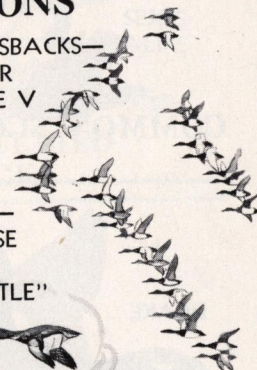


## TYPICAL FLOCK FORMATIONS

MOST PUDDLE DUCKS—  
LOOSE FORMATION



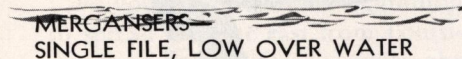
CANVASBACKS—  
LINES OR  
LOOSE V



GOLDENEYES—  
SMALL, LOOSE  
FLOCKS  
WINGS "WHISTLE"



MERGANSERS—  
SINGLE FILE, LOW OVER WATER



BUFFLEHEADS—  
SMALL DUCK,  
SMALL GROUPS



TEALS—  
LOW, TWISTING  
FLIGHT







DRAKE



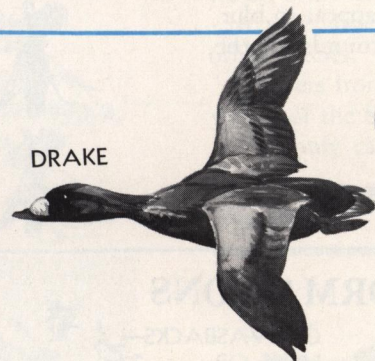
IMMATURE



HEN

## SURF SCOTER

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DRAKE



IMMATURE



HEN

## COMMON SCOTER

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DRAKE



IMMATURE



HEN

## WHITE-WINGED SCOTER



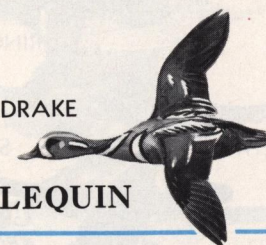
DRAKE



HEN

## OLDSQUAW

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DRAKE



HEN

## HARLEQUIN

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## SPECIES WITH LIMITED RANGES

These birds, except the tree ducks, are primarily of the sea.

Scoter hunting is heaviest in New England, where all three species are locally known as "coots." Some flocks migrate along the coast as far as the Carolinas on the Atlantic and lower California on the Pacific.

Harlequins go little further south than Long Island and Puget Sound and north to Alaska. Oldsquaws have essentially the same range, plus the Great Lakes.

Fulvous tree ducks are beginning to spread into the east from Louisiana west to California, while the black-bellied is still restricted to Texas.

Common eiders are only in the North Atlantic, but related forms occur in the northwest and Alaska.

## FULVOUS TREE DUCK

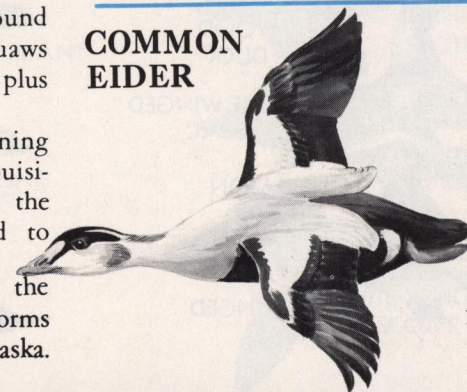


SEXES ALIKE

## BLACK-BELLIED TREE DUCK

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## COMMON EIDER

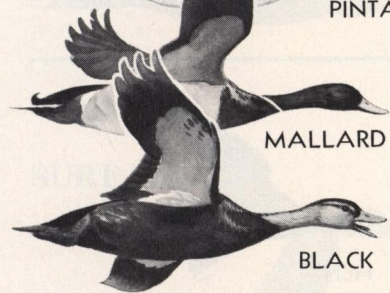




# RELATIVE SIZE OF— WILD DUCKS AND GEESE



PINTAIL



MALLARD



GADWALL



WIDGEON



SHOVELER



WOOD  
DUCK



BLUE-WINGED  
TEAL



CINNAMON  
TEAL



GREEN-WINGED  
TEAL



BUFFLEHEAD



RUDDY



RINGNECK



LESSER  
SCAUP



GREATER  
SCAUP



GOLDENEYE



REDHEAD



CANVASBACK



HOODED  
MERGANSER



RED-BREASTED  
MERGANSER



COMMON MERGANSER



CANADA



SNOW



WHITE-FRONTED



LESSER CANADA



BLUE



EMPEROR



BRANT



BLACK BRANT



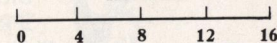
CAKCLING



ROSS'

All birds on these  
two pages are drawn  
to the same scale.

INCHES



HARLEQUIN



OLDSQUAW



FULVOUS  
TREE DUCK



SURF  
SCOTER



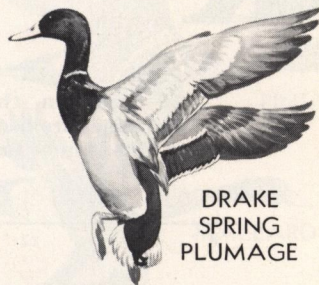
COMMON  
SCOTER



WHITE-WINGED  
SCOTER



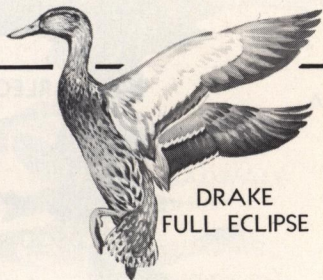
## ECLIPSE PLUMAGE



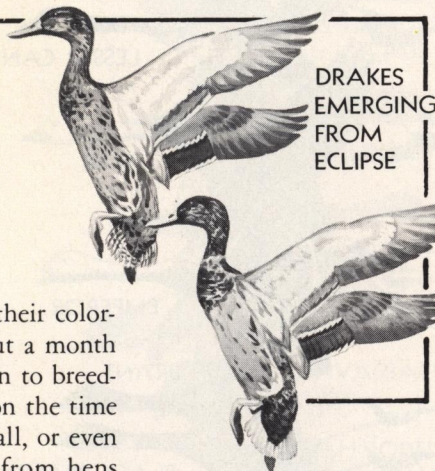
DRAKE  
SPRING  
PLUMAGE



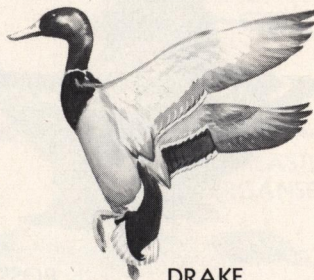
HEN



DRAKE  
FULL ECLIPSE



DRAKES  
EMERGING  
FROM  
ECLIPSE

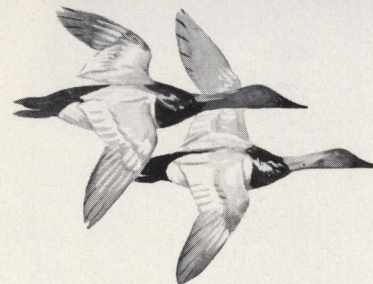


DRAKE  
FALL PLUMAGE

Drakes of nearly all species lose their colorful attire after mating, and for about a month look like adult females. Their return to breeding plumage is slow. Depending on the time of mating, it can be well into the fall, or even winter, before drakes can be told from hens in flight.

Teals and shovelers are late in regaining their bright breeding plumage, and many migrate in the duller eclipse plumage.

The body feathers of all ducks are shed twice each year to account for this change; the wing feathers are molted but once. Thus the wings are the same pattern and color the year around.



## WHAT TO LOOK FOR—*(Continued from page 4)*

The maneuvers of a flock in the air can help indicate the species. Mallards, pintails, and widgeons form loose groups; teals and shovelers flash by in small bunches; mergansers often appear in single file; canvasbacks shift from waving lines to temporary V's; redheads "boil up" in short flights from one end of a lake to the other.

Closer up, individual silhouettes can show large heads or small, broad bills or narrow, fat bodies or slender, long tails or short. Trained observers also identify ducks from the wingbeats: they may be fast or slow, short rapid flutters or long strokes.

At close range, color areas can be positive. Depending on light conditions they may or may not appear in their true color, but their size and location are a key to identity.

The sound of wings can be as important as that of voice. The pinions of goldeneyes whistle in flight; the swish of wood ducks is different from the steady rush of canvasbacks. Not all ducks quack: many whistle, squeal, or grunt. Experience can teach you the difference.



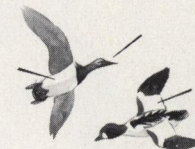
HABITAT



FLOCK  
ACTION



SILHOUETTES



COLOR AREAS



SOUND

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