

DUCKS AT A DISTANCE

**A WATERFOWL IDENTIFICATION
GUIDE**

Identification is Important

Identifying waterfowl gives many hours of enjoyment to millions of people. This guide will help you recognize birds on the wing—it emphasizes their fall and winter plumage patterns as well as size, shape, and flight characteristics. It does not include local names.

Recognizing the species of ducks and geese can be rewarding to birdwatchers and hunters—and the ducks.

Hunters can contribute to their own sport by not firing at those species that are either protected or scarce, and needed as breeders to restore the flocks. It can add to their daily limit; when extra birds of certain species can be taken legally, hunters who know their ducks on the wing come out ahead.

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



What to Look For

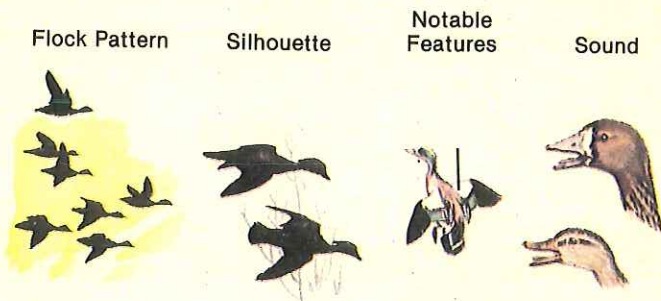
Differences in size, shape, plumage patterns and colors, wing beat, flocking behavior, voice, and habitat—all help to distinguish one species from another.

Flock maneuvers in the air are clues. Mallards, pintails, and wigeon form loose groups; teal and shovelers flash by in small, compact bunches; at a distance, canvasbacks shift from waving lines to temporary V's.

Closer up, individual silhouettes are important. Variations of head shapes and sizes, lengths of wings and tails, and fat bodies or slim can be seen.

Within shotgun range, color areas can be important. Light conditions might make them look different, but their size and location are positive keys. The sound of their wings can help as much as their calls. Flying goldeneyes make a whistling sound; wood ducks move with a swish; canvasbacks make a steady rushing sound. Not all ducks quack; many whistle, squeal, or grunt.

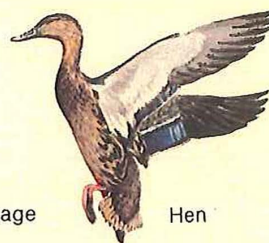
Although not a hard and fast rule, different species tend to use different types of habitat. Puddle ducks like shallow marshes and creeks while divers prefer larger, deeper, and more open waters.



Eclipse Plumage



Drake: Spring Plumage

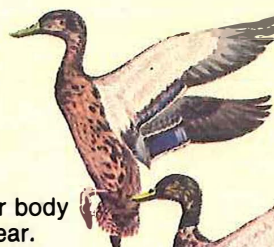


Hen



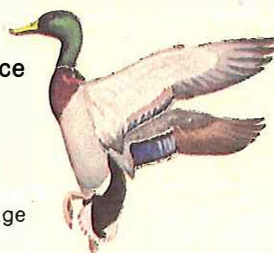
Drake: Full Eclipse

Drakes Emerging from Eclipse



Most ducks shed their body feathers twice each year. Nearly all drakes lose their bright plumage after mating, and for a few weeks resemble females. This hen-like appearance is called the eclipse plumage. The return to breeding coloration varies in species and individuals of each species. Blue-winged teal and shovelers may retain the eclipse plumage until well into the winter.

Wing feathers are shed only once a year; wing colors are always the same.



Drake: Fall Plumage

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



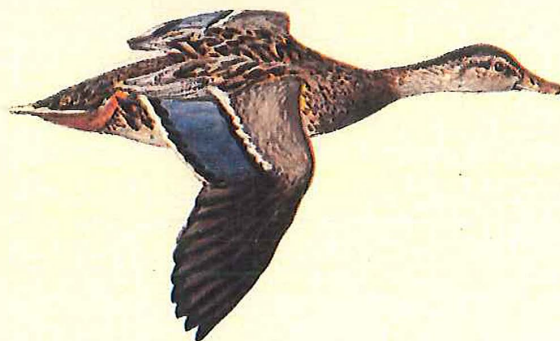
Mallard

Length—24"
Weight—2¾ lbs.

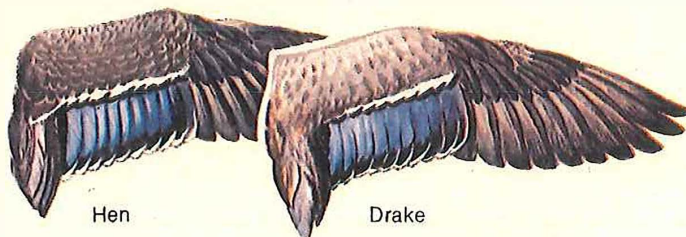
Eclipse Drake



Hen

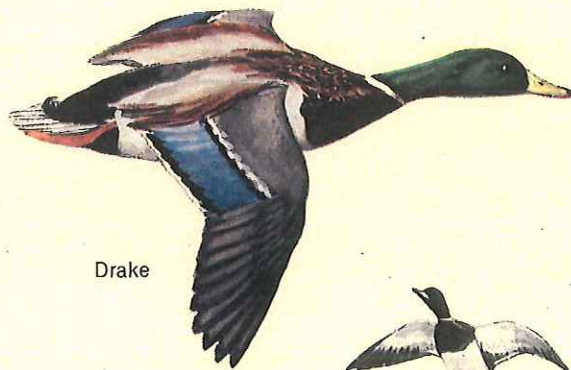


The mallard is our most common duck, found in all flyways. The males are often called "greenheads." The main wintering area is the lower Mississippi basin, and along the gulf coast, but many stay as far north as open waters permits.



Hen

Drake



Drake



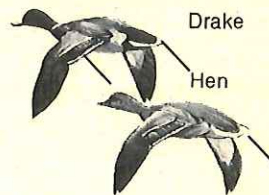
Drake



Hen

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

The flight is not particularly rapid. Hens have a loud *quack*; the drake's voice is a low-pitched *kwek-kwek*.



Drake

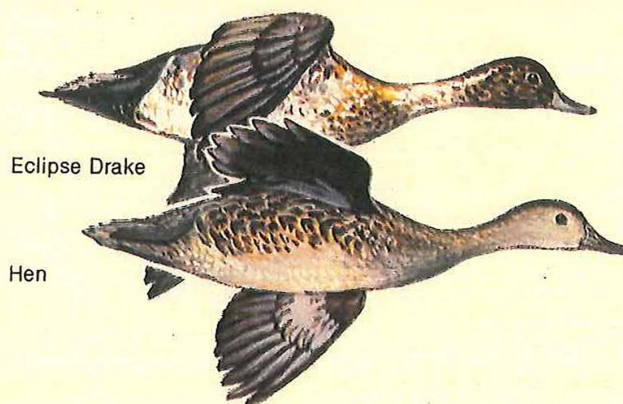
Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Pintail

Length—26"
Weight—1¾ lbs.

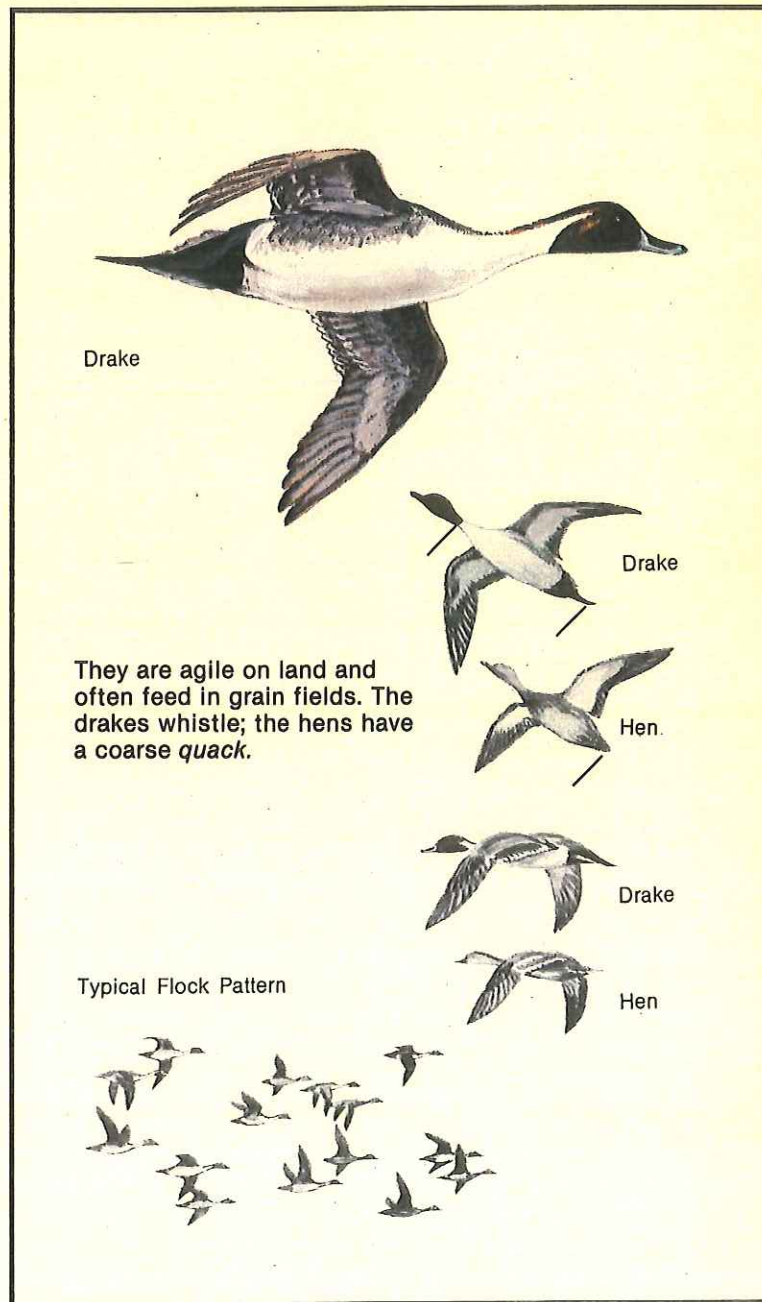


These ducks use all four flyways, but are most plentiful in the west.

They are extremely graceful and fast fliers, fond of zig-zagging from great heights before leveling off to land.

The long neck and tall make them appear longer than mallards, but in body size and weight they are smaller.



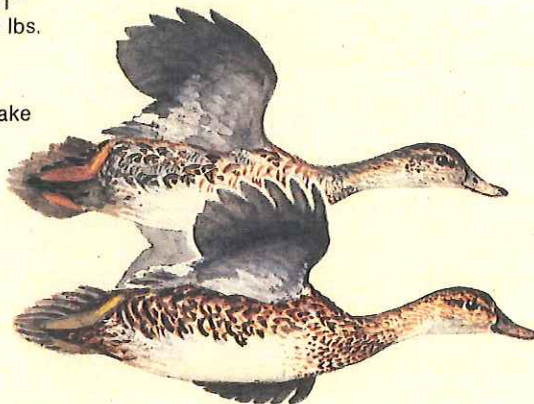


Gadwall

Length—21"
Weight—2 lbs.

Eclipse Drake

Hen



Gadwalls are most numerous in the Central Flyway, but not too common anywhere. They are often called "gray mallards" or "gray ducks." They are one of the earliest migrants, seldom facing cold weather.

They are the only puddle ducks with a white speculum.



Hen

Drake



Drake



Drake



Hen

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

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



Drake



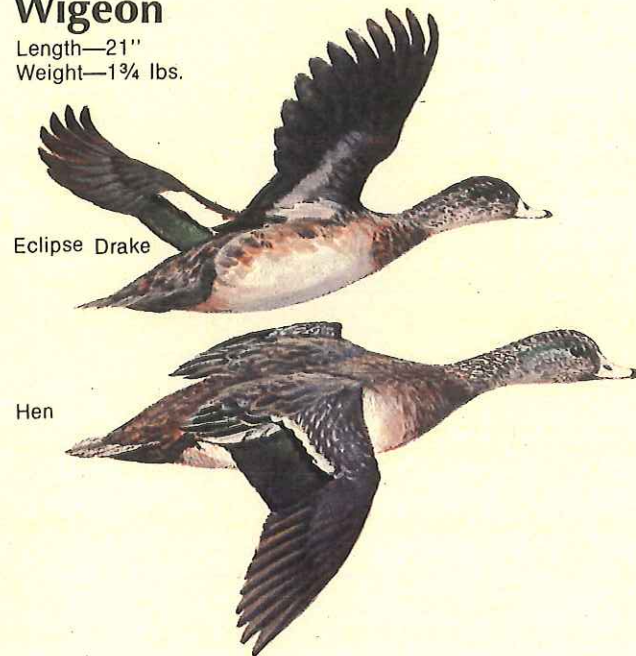
Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Wigeon

Length—21"
Weight—1¾ lbs.



Eclipse Drake

Hen

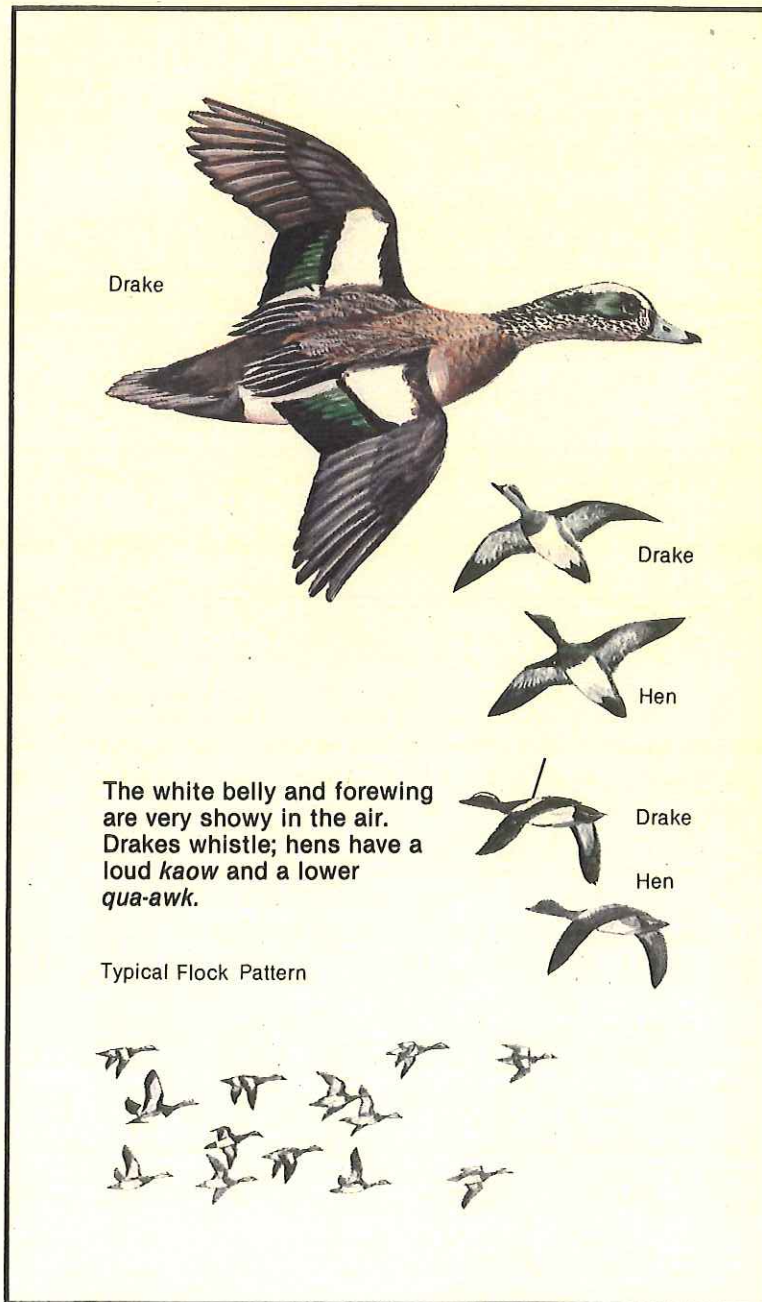
These are nervous birds, quick to take alarm. Their flight is fast, irregular, with many twists and turns. In a bunched flock, their movements have been compared to those of pigeons.

When open water is handy, wigeons often raft up offshore until late afternoon when they move to marshes and ponds to feed.



Hen

Drake



Shoveler

Length—19½"
Weight—1½ lbs.

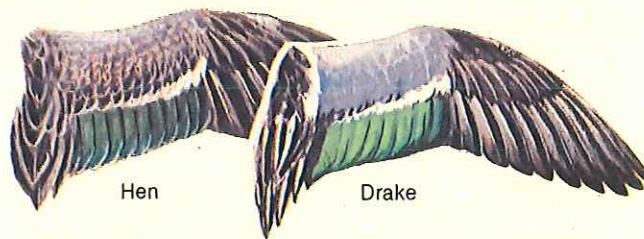


Eclipse Drake

Hen

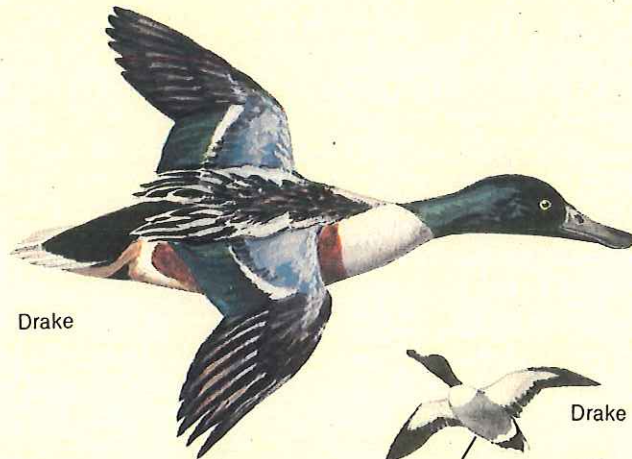
Shovelers, 'spoonbills' to many, are early migrants, moving out at the first frost. The largest numbers are in the Central and Pacific flyways.

The usual flight is steady and direct. When startled, the small flocks twist and turn in the air like teal.



Hen

Drake



Drake



Drake



Hen

They are not highly regarded as table birds, because one third of the usual diet is animal matter.

Drakes call *woh-woh* and *took-took*; the hen's *quack* is feeble.



Drake



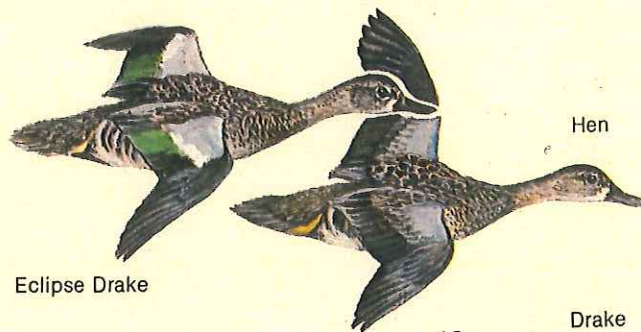
Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Blue-Winged Teal

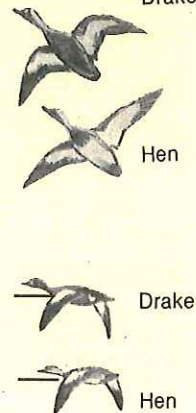
Length—16"
Weight—15 oz.



Their small size and twisting turning flight gives the illusion of great speed. The small, compact flocks commonly fly low over the marshes, and often take the hunter by surprise.

They are more vocal than most ducks—their high-pitched peeping and nasal quacking is commonly heard in spring and to a lesser extent in fall.

These teal are among the first ducks to migrate each fall, and one of the last in the spring.



Cinnamon Teal

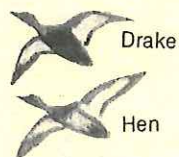


Eclipse Drake

Drake

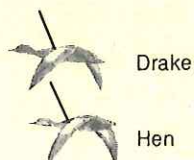


Blue-Winged Drake



Drake

Hen



Drake

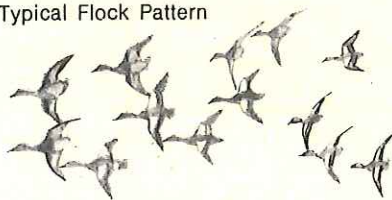
Hen

In the Pacific Flyway, cinnamon teal are far more common than blue-wings. The hens look alike and the habits of both species are similar.

The pale blue forewing patch is the best field mark, as drakes are usually in eclipse until January or longer.

Drakes have a whistling *peep*; hens utter a low *quack*.

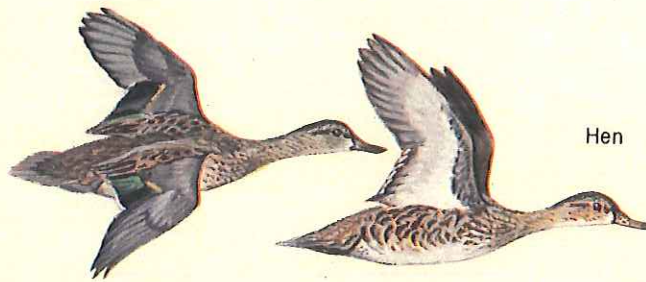
Typical Flock Pattern



Green-Winged Teal

Length—15 in.
Weight—14 oz.

Eclipse Drake



Quite hardy—some birds stay as far north as open water is found.

The smallest and one of the most common of our ducks. Their tiny size gives the impression of great speed, but mallards can fly faster. Their flight is often low, erratic, with the entire flock twisting and turning as one unit.





Drake



Drake



Hen

They nest as far north as Alaska, and migrate in all four flyways. Early fall drakes are usually still in full eclipse plumage.



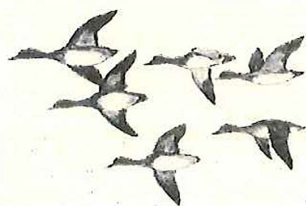
Drake



Hen

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

Typical Flock Pattern



Wood Duck

Length—18½ in.
Weight—1½ lbs.

Eclipse Drake

Hen

Found in all flyways; most numerous in the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways and fewest in the Central.

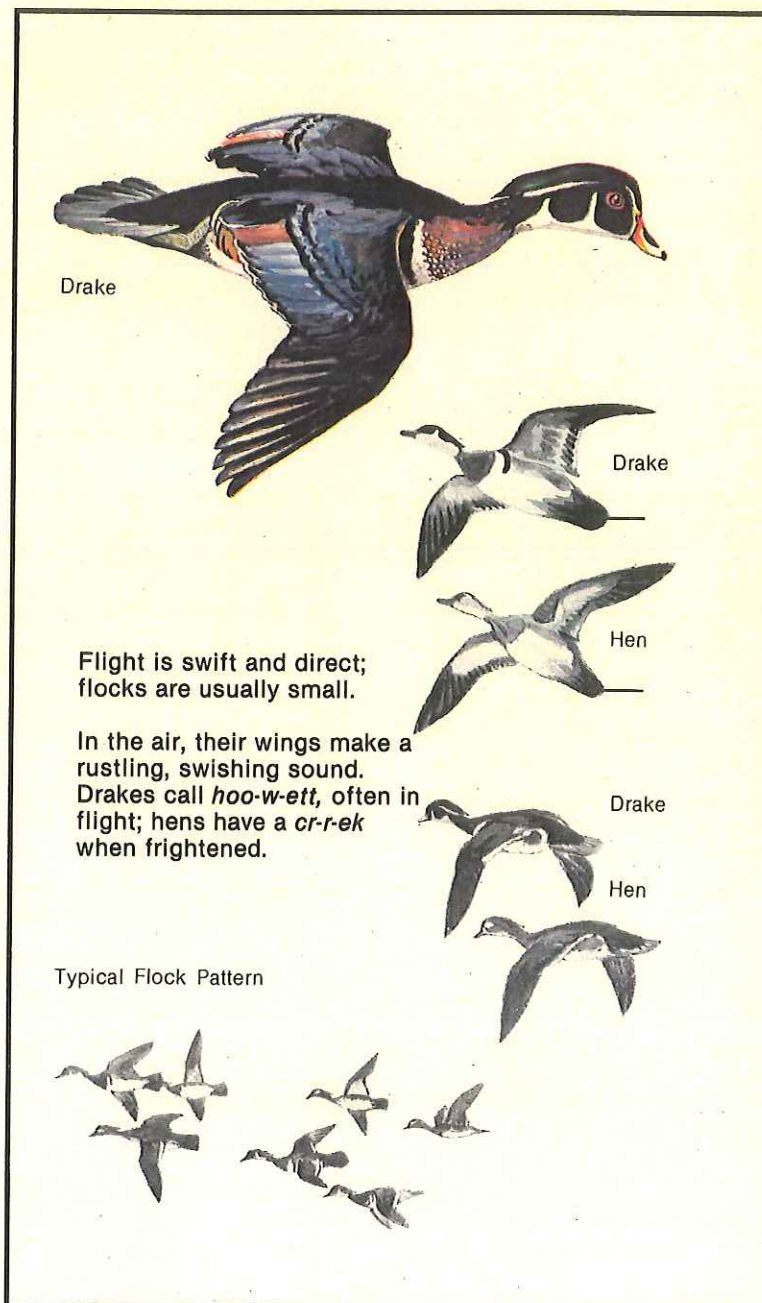
They are early migrants; most of them have left the northern States by mid-November.

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



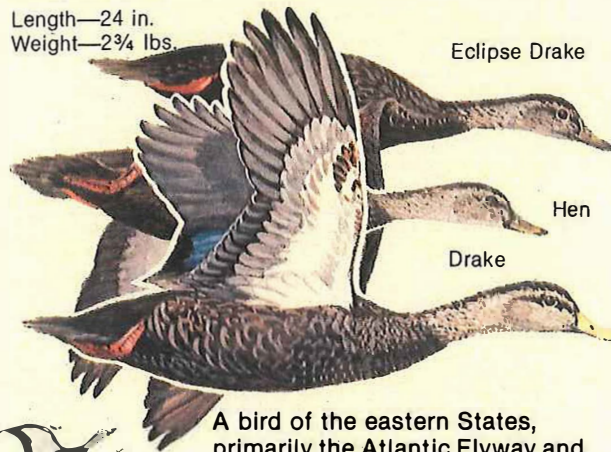
Hen

Drake



Black Duck

Length—24 in.
Weight—2¾ lbs.



Similar Sexes



Typical Flock Pattern

A bird of the eastern States, primarily the Atlantic Flyway and, to a lesser extent, the Mississippi.

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 ocean much more than mallards.

Flight is swift, usually in small flocks.

White wing lining in contrast to very dark body plumage is a good identification clue.

The hen's *quack* and the drake's *kwek-kwek* are duplicates of the mallards.



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. Since many 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 before submerging again.

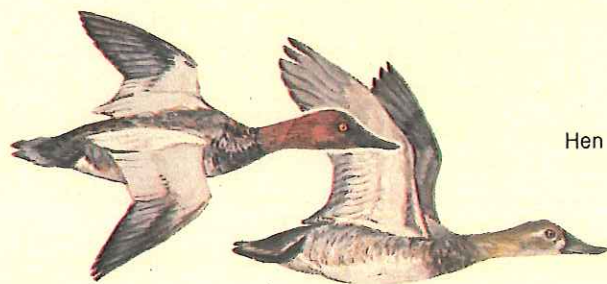
Their diets of fish, shellfish, mollusks, and aquatic plants make them second choice, as a group, for sportsmen. Canvasbacks and redheads fattened on eel grass or wild celery are notable exceptions.

Since their wings are smaller in proportion to the size and weight of their bodies, they have a more rapid wingbeat than puddle ducks.



Canvasback

Length—22 in.
Weight—3 lbs.

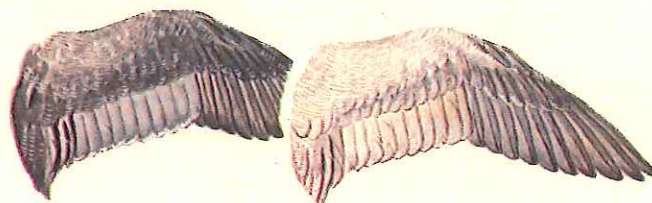


Hen

Eclipse Drake

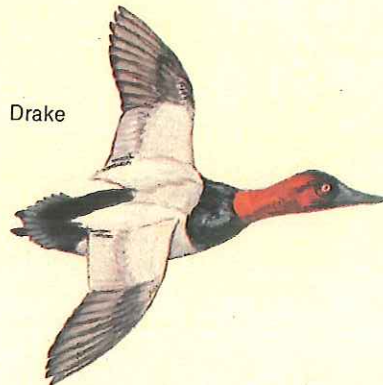
Normally late to start south, canvasbacks migrate in lines and irregular V's.

In feeding areas, compact flocks fly in indefinite formations. Their wingbeat is rapid and noisy; their speed is the swiftest of all our ducks.



Hen

Drake

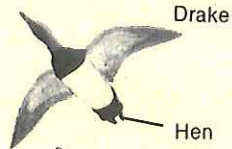


Drake

Feeding behavior is highly variable. In some areas they feed at night and spend the day rafted up in open waters; in other areas they feed inshore mornings and evenings.

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

Drakes *croak*, *peep*, and *growl*; hens have a mallard-like *quack*.



Drake



Hen



Drake



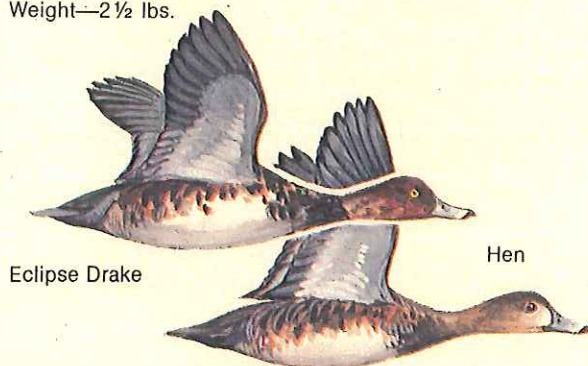
Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Redheads

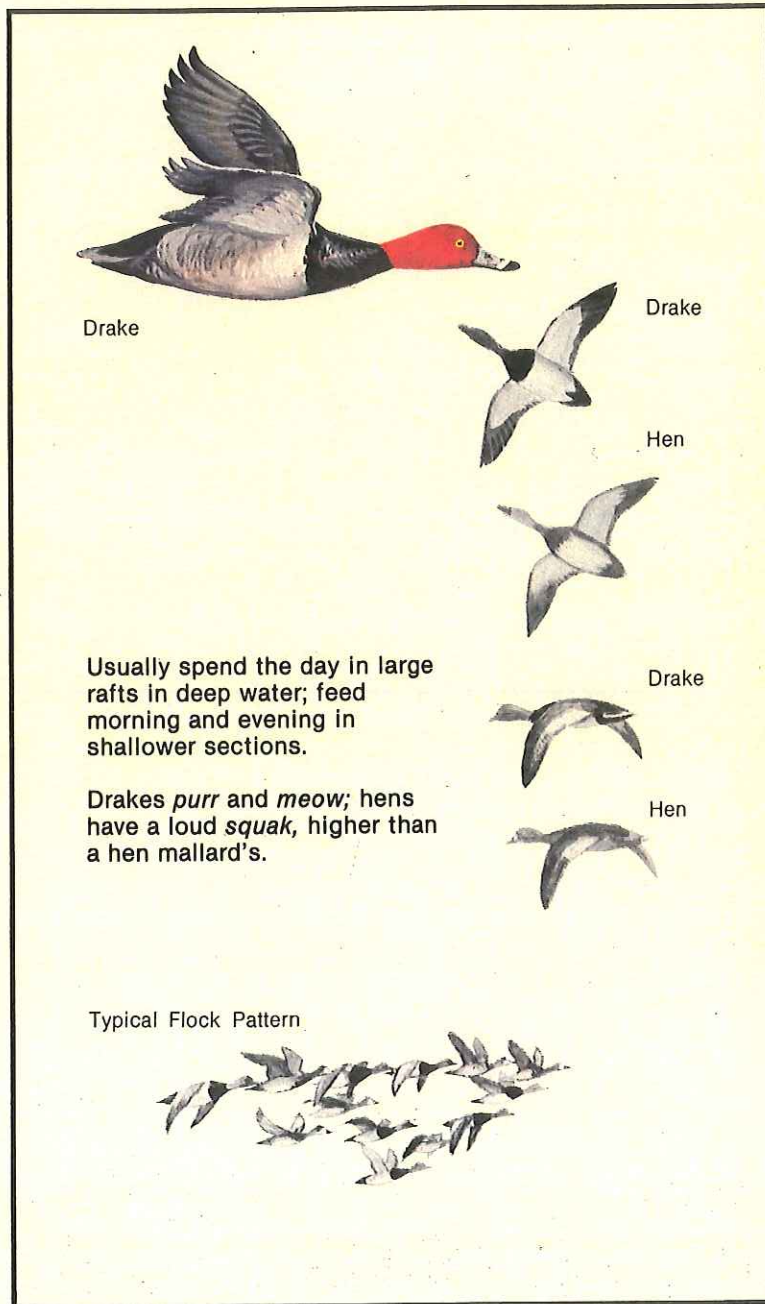
Length—20 in.
Weight—2 ½ lbs.



Range coast to coast, with the largest numbers in the Central Flyway. Migratory flocks travel in V's; move in irregular formations over feeding areas. Often found associating with canvasback.

In the air, they give the impression of always being in a hurry.

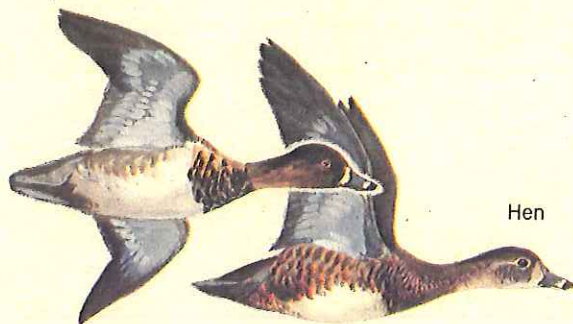




Ringneck

Length—17 in.
Weight—2 ½ lbs.

Eclipse Drake



Hen

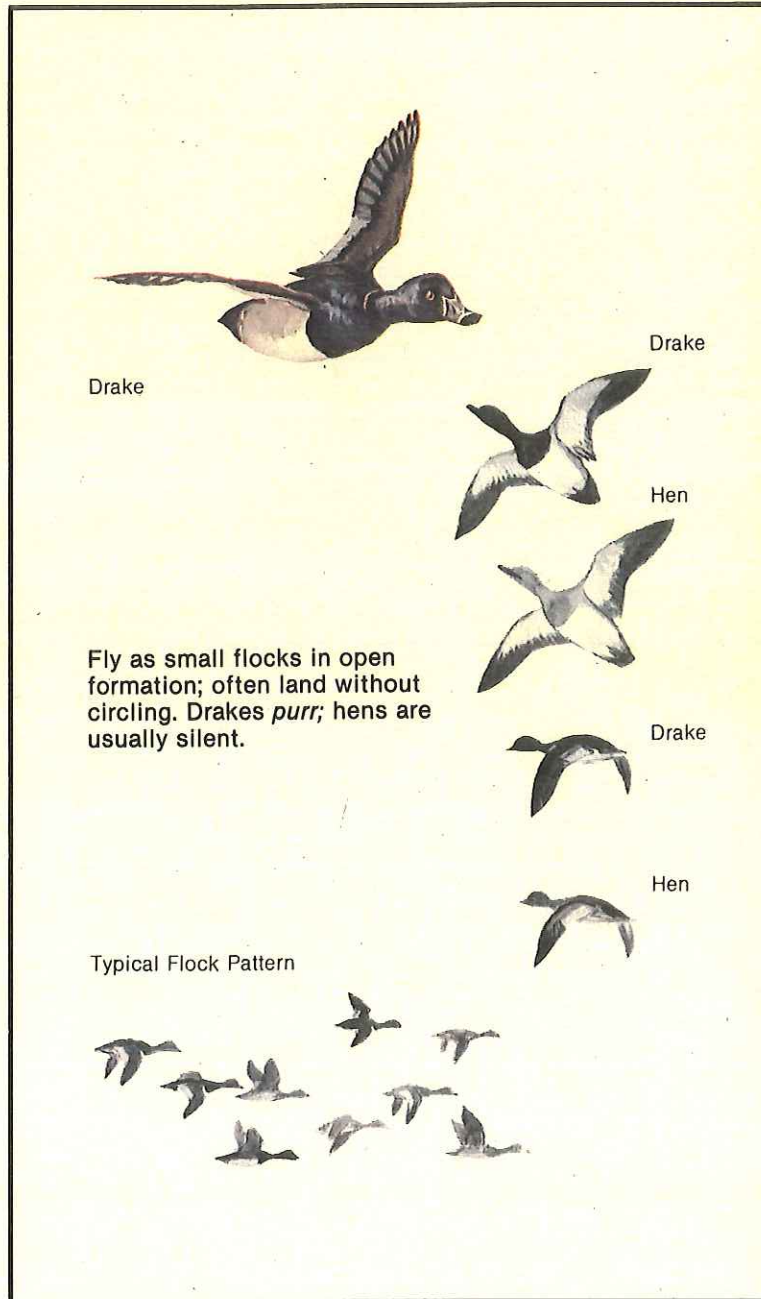
Similar in appearance to scaups, but more often found in fresh marshes and wooded ponds. In flight, the dark wings are different from the white-edged wings of scaup.

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



Hen

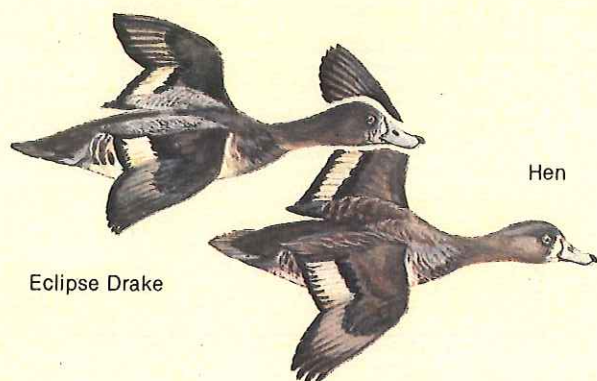
Drake



Scaup

Greater—Length—18 ½ in.
Weight—2 lbs.

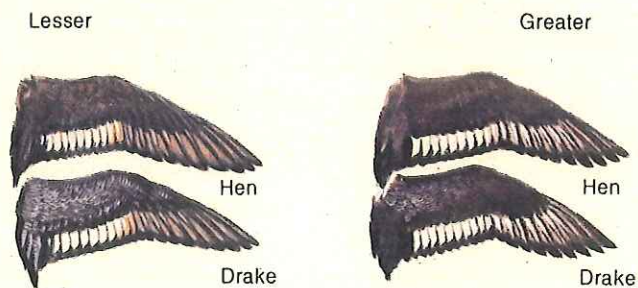
Lesser—Length—17 in.
Weight—1 ¾

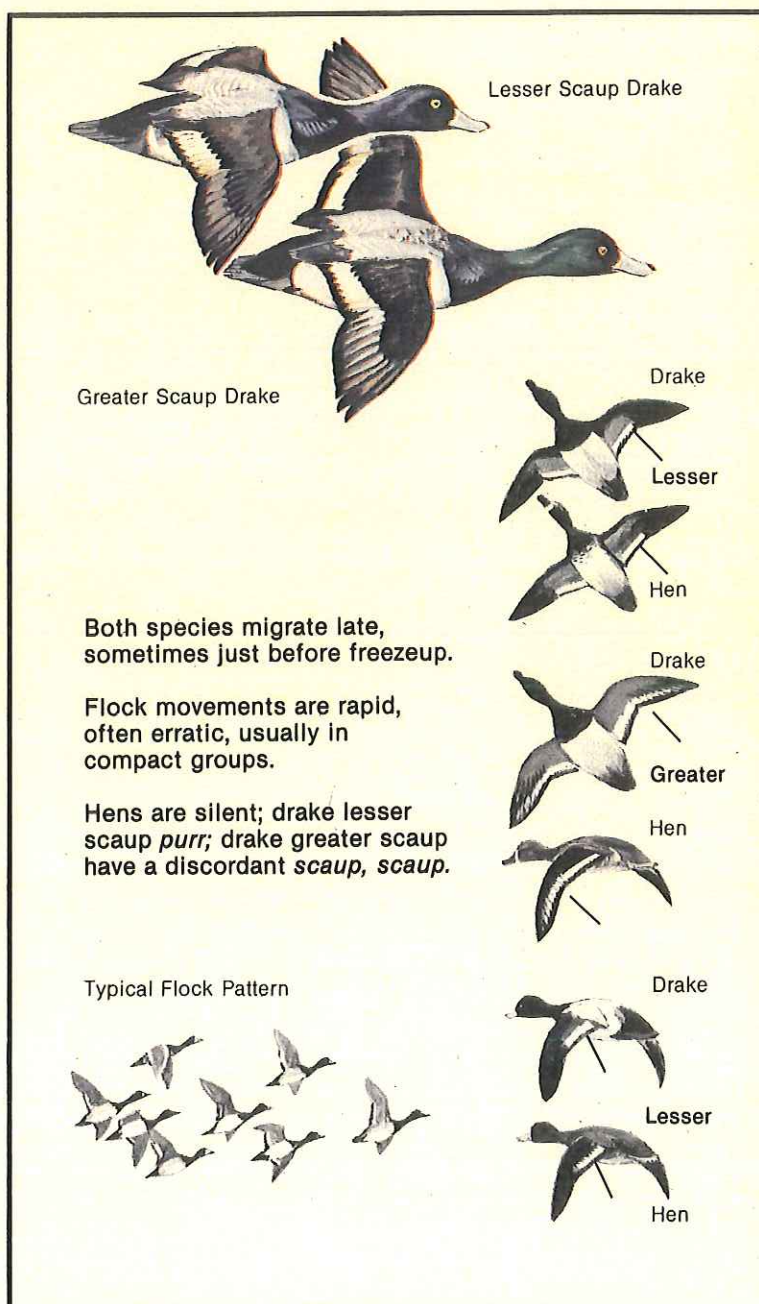


Except for the wing marks, greater and lesser scaup appear nearly identical in the field.

The light band near the trailing edges of the wings runs almost to the tip in the greater scaup, but only about half way in the lesser.

Greater scaup prefer large open water areas; lesser scaup often use marshes and ponds.





Goldeneye

Common—Length—19 in.
Weight—2 ¼ lbs.

Barrow's—Length—19 in.
Weight—2¾ lbs.



Hen Both Species

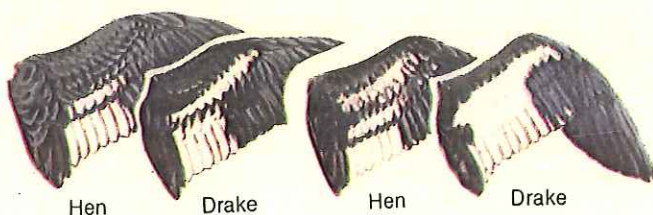
Common Eclipse Drake

These are active, strong-winged fliers moving singly or in small flocks, often high in the air. Distinctive wing-whistling sound in flight has earned the name of whistlers.

Goldeneyes generally move south late in the season; most of them winter on coastal waters and the Great Lakes. Inland, they like rapids and fast water.

Barrow's

Common

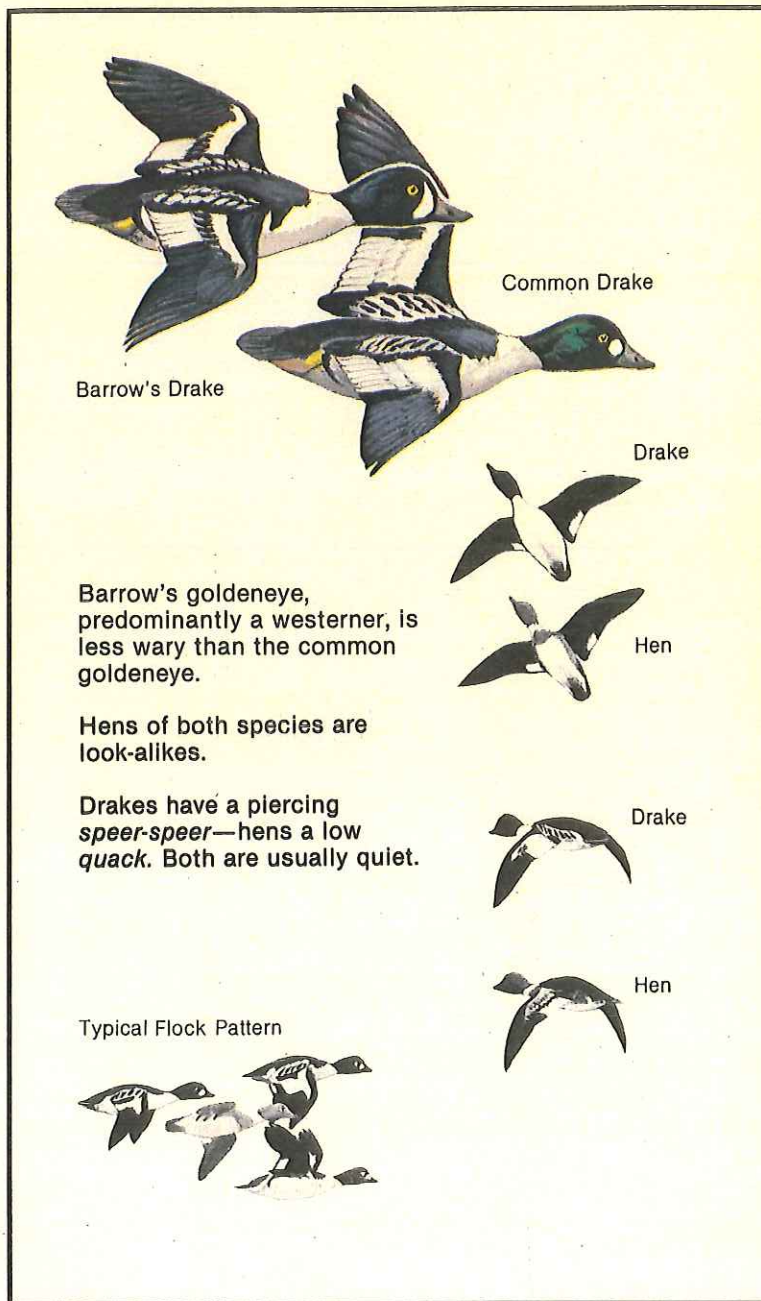


Hen

Drake

Hen

Drake



Bufflehead

Length—14 ½ in
Weight—1 lb.



Eclipse Drake

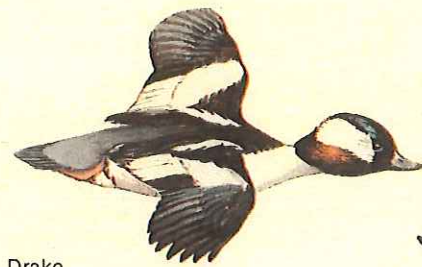
Stragglers migrate south in mid-fall, but the largest numbers move just ahead of freezeup. Most flocks in feeding areas are small—5 or 6 birds, with more hens and immatures than adult drakes.

Very small size, bold black and white color pattern, and low, swift flight are field marks. Unlike most divers, they can fly straight up from a watery takeoff.



Hen

Drake



Drake



Drake

Hen



Largest concentrations are on both seacoasts and along the Gulf of Mexico. Inland, they will remain as far north as open water permits.

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



Drake



Hen

Typical Flock Pattern



Waterfowl Hunting

Ruddy

Length—15½ in.
Weight—1⅓ lbs.



The ruddy duck often dives or swims away from danger rather than flying. When flying, their small wings stroke so fast they resemble bumblebees.



Sexes Similar

Waterfowl Identification Guide



Summer Drake

Drake



Hen



Drake



Hen



They are early to mid-fall migrants.

Drakes often cock their tails upright at an angle, the only species to habitually do so.

Both hens and drakes are silent in the fall.

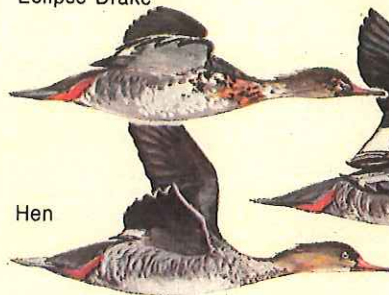
Typical Flock Pattern



Red-Breasted Merganser

Length—23 in.
Weight—2 ½ lbs.

Eclipse Drake



Drake



Hen

Drake



Hen



Drake



Hen



Typical Flock Pattern



Hen

Drake

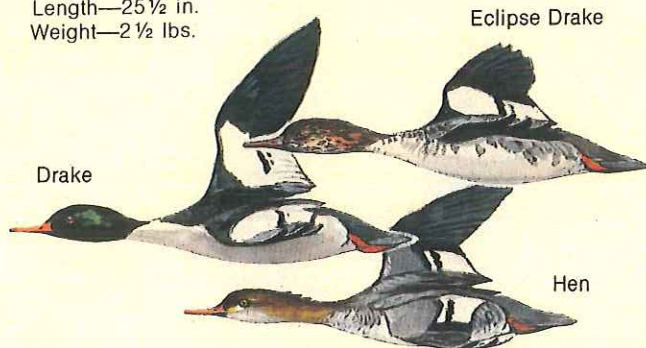
These birds winter most abundantly in coastal waters, including the Gulf of Mexico, and to a lesser extent, the Great Lakes.

Their flight, strong and direct, is usually low over the water. They are difficult to distinguish in flight from the common merganser.

Voice: Seldom heard.

Common Merganser

Length—25½ in.
Weight—2½ lbs.

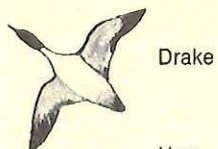
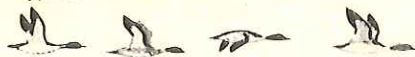


This species is larger than the red-breasted merganser, and is one of the largest of our ducks. It is one of the last to migrate south, and is more common than the red-breasted merganser on inland waters.

Flocks move in "follow the leader" style, low over the water.

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

Typical Flock Pattern



Hooded Merganser

Length—18 in.
Weight—1½ lbs.

Eclipse Drake



Drake



Hen



Drake



Hen



Often seen in pairs, or very small flocks. Short rapid wingstrokes create an impression of great speed.

Winters in the inland waters of all coastal States; seldom goes to salt water.

Voice: Seldom heard in fall.



Hen

Drake

Whistling Ducks

Length—18–19 in.
Weight—1¾ lbs.

Fulvous



Black-Bellied



The trailing legs and rounded wings of these slow flying ducks makes them look bigger than they are.

Both species are primarily Mexican. In the U.S., the black-bellied is found only in south Texas and Louisiana. The fulvous also occurs there and in Florida with occasional stragglers further north along both coasts and the Mississippi Valley. The fulvous is the more common of the two species in the United States.

Sexes are alike. Both species have shrill whistling calls.



Fulvous



Black-Bellied



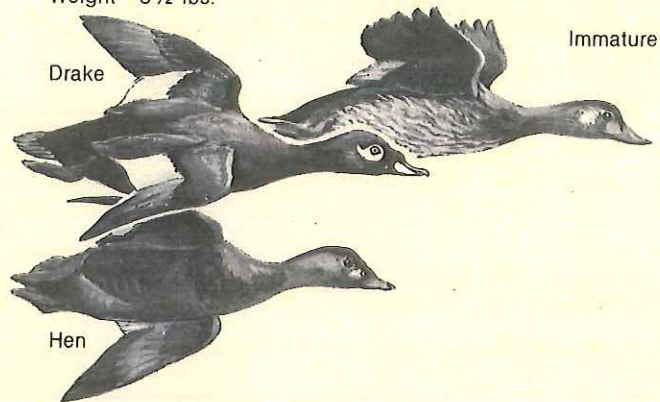
Fulvous



Black-Bellied

White-Winged Scoter

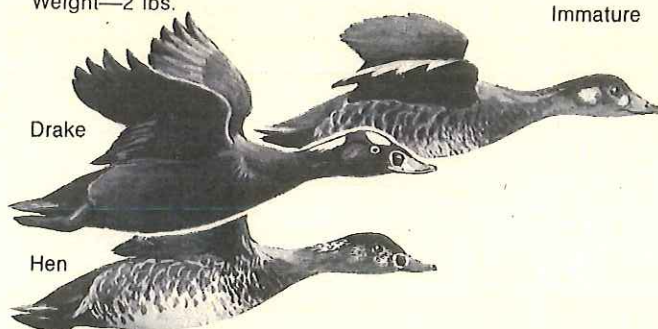
Length—21½ in.
Weight—3½ lbs.



The three scoters on these two pages are sea ducks, wintering on open coastal waters. White-wings are among the heaviest and largest of all ducks.

Surf Scoter

Length—19½ in.
Weight—2 lbs.

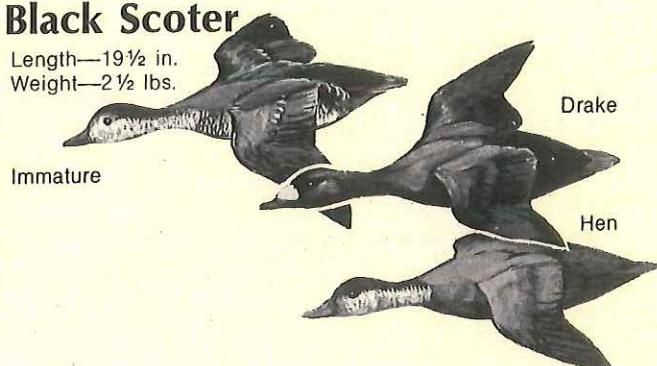


Like all scoters, these birds move along our coasts in loose flocks, stringing into irregular, wavy lines. Drakes can be distinguished from other scoters by two white patches on their head and the bright color of the bill.

Flight is strong, direct, usually close to the waves.

Black Scoter

Length—19½ in.
Weight—2½ lbs.

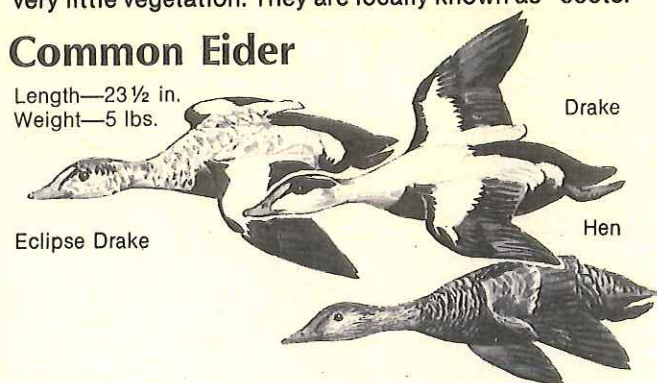


In flight, drakes appear all black except for the flash of the slight gray underwing and the bright yellow swelling at the base of the upper bill.

Scoters feed on mollusks, crabs, and some fish and very little vegetation. They are locally known as "coots."

Common Eider

Length—23½ in.
Weight—5 lbs.



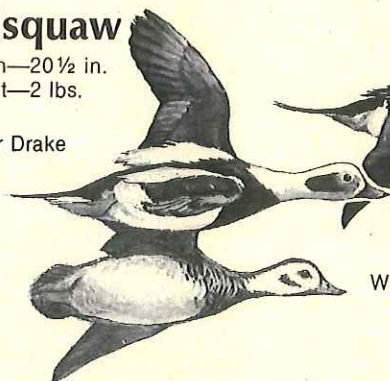
Thick-necked stocky birds, alternately flapping and sailing in flight; flocks string out in a line, close to the water. Occurs in the United States chiefly along New England coasts and occasionally south to New Jersey.

Other eiders—king, spectacled and Stellar's—occur in Alaska and are not pictured in this guide. King eiders occasionally are found in north Atlantic coastal waters.

Oldsquaw

Length—20½ in.
Weight—2 lbs.

Winter Drake



Summer Drake



Winter Hen

A slim, brightly plumaged sea duck. Smaller than the scoters or eiders.

Flight is swift and low with constantly changing flock formations. Ranges along both coasts and the Great Lakes.

One of the most vocal of ducks; drakes have a loud pleasant *caloo, caloo*, constantly heard.

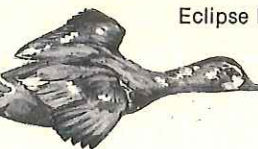
Harlequin

Length—17 in.
Weight—1½ lbs.

Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen

Glossy slate-blue plumage enlivened by white stripes and spots give the adult male harlequin a striking appearance. The female resembles a small female scoter. At a distance, both sexes look black. Flight is swift, with abrupt turns. Flocks are small and compact. Ranges both coasts, north from New Jersey and San Francisco. Uncommon.

Swans

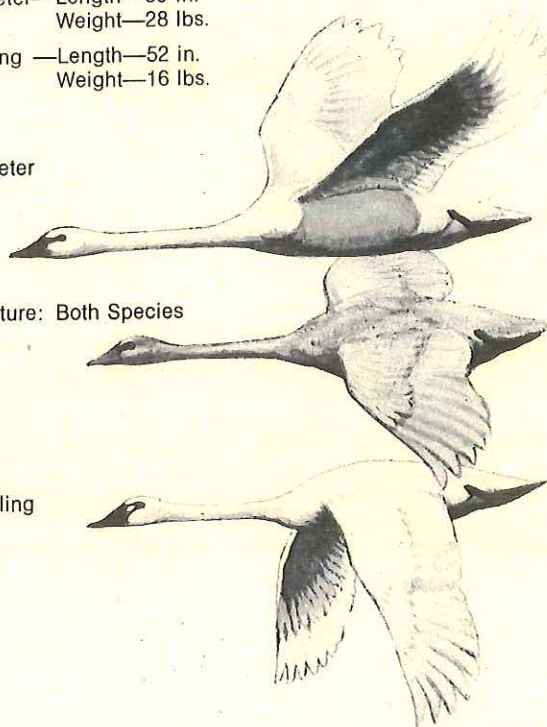
Trumpeter—Length—59 in.
Weight—28 lbs.

Whistling —Length—52 in.
Weight—16 lbs.

Trumpeter

Immature: Both Species

Whistling

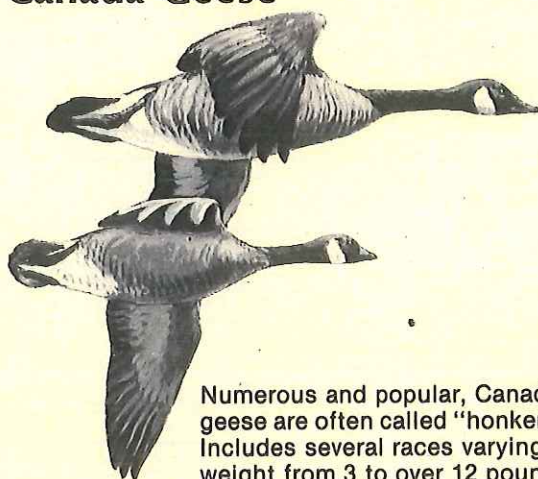


Once thought to be rare, trumpeter swans are slowly increasing in Alaska and on western refuges and parks.

Whistling swans are common and increasing. They winter near Chesapeake Bay, San Francisco Bay, Puget Sound and Salton Sea. Occasionally found in fields.

Both species are large with pure white plumage.

Canada Geese



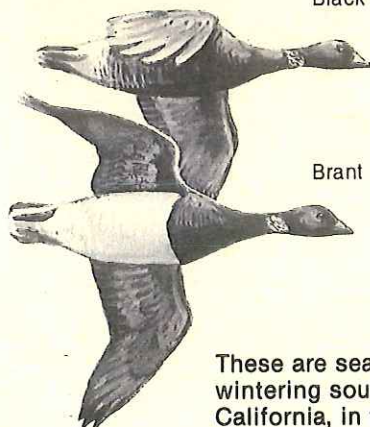
Numerous and popular, Canada geese are often called "honkers." Includes several races varying in weight from 3 to over 12 pounds.

All have black heads and necks, white cheeks, similar habitats and voices. Sexes are identical.

Brant

Length—24–25 in.
Weight—3¼–3¾ lbs.

Black Brant



These are sea geese, the blacks wintering south to Baja, California, in the Pacific.

The Atlantic race winters from Virginia northward. Flight is swift, in irregular and changing flock patterns.

Snow Geese

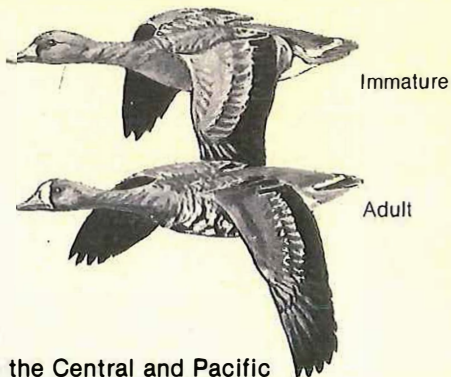
Length—29–31 in.
Weight—6 ½–7 ½ lbs.

Two races of snow geese are recognized: greater snows along the Atlantic Coast, and lesser snows elsewhere on the continent. Blue geese are a color phase of the lesser snow.



White-Fronted Geese

Length—29 in.
Weight—6 ¼ lbs.



Migrates chiefly in the Central and Pacific flyways but also present in the Mississippi. Rare in the Atlantic Flyway. Appears brownish gray at a distance. Often called "specklebelly".

Most distinctive characteristic of the V-shaped flocks is the high pitched call *kow-kow-kow-kow*.