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# Waterfowl Identification Guide

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PDF

ISBN: 978-1-100-25648-1

Cat No.: CW66-521/2015E-PDF

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# **Waterfowl Identification Guide**

Adapted from a text by Bob Hines,  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Reprinted and adapted  
by the Canadian Wildlife Service,  
Environment Canada

Ottawa 2014



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# Identification Is Important

Identifying different species of waterfowl brings hours of enjoyment to thousands of people. This guide helps identify birds in flight, and emphasizes their fall and winter plumage, size, shape and flight characteristics.

Like birdwatchers, hunters gain by knowing the various species of ducks and geese. Hunters support their own sport when they refrain from shooting species that are protected or at risk, as their restraint helps rebuild flocks. When the legal bag limit is raised for certain duck species, hunters who know their birds on the wing have a clear advantage. Finally, the ultimate value of knowing a Mallard from a Merganser becomes all too evident when it's time to cook the bird: a Mallard is far more savoury than a fishy-tasting Merganser.

Note that local bird names are not given.





## What to Look For

Size, shape, plumage patterns and colours, wingbeat, flocking behaviour, call and habitat—all these characteristics help to distinguish one species from another.

Flock manoeuvres in the air are clues. Mallards, Northern Pintails and American Wigeons form loose groups; teals and Northern Shovelers flash by in small, compact bunches; and, at a distance, Canvasbacks shift from wavy lines to temporary V's.

Closer up, individual silhouettes are important. Variations in head shape and size, the length of wings and tails, and body size can be seen.

Within shotgun range, colour areas are important. If light conditions make a positive identification difficult, the size and location of colour areas are strong indicators. The sound of wings can help as much as bird calls. Flying Golden-eyes produce a whistling sound; Wood Duck wings sound different than the whistling wings of Canvasbacks. Ducks do not all have the same call: while most do quack, some whistle, cry sharply or grunt.



Flock Pattern



Silhouette



Colour Areas



Sound

# Eclipse Plumage



Drake:  
Spring Plumage



Hen



Drake:  
Full Eclipse



Drake  
Emerging  
from Eclipse



Drake  
Emerging  
from Eclipse



Drake:  
Fall Plumage

Although not a hard-and-fast rule, each species tends to use a specific type of habitat. Dabbling ducks like shallow marshes and creeks, while divers prefer broad, deep and open waters.

## **Eclipse Plumage**

Most ducks shed their body feathers twice each year. This is called moulting. The drakes of nearly all species lose their bright breeding plumage after mating and, for a few weeks, they resemble females. This hen-like appearance is called being in eclipse plumage. The moult that restores breeding plumage varies among species and even among individuals of each species. Blue-winged Teals and Northern Shovelers may retain the eclipse plumage well until into winter, but many species lose it in fall.

Wing feathers are shed only once a year; wing colours and patterns always stay the same.

# Dabbler Ducks



Feeding



Takeoff



# Dabbler Ducks

Dabbler ducks are typically birds of shallow freshwater marshes and watercourses rather than of large lakes and bays. They are good divers, but usually feed by dabbling or tipping, tails in the air, rather than submerging.

The speculum, or brightly coloured wing patch, is generally iridescent and shiny, and often a telltale field mark.

Any duck feeding in croplands will likely be a dabbler duck, for most of this group are sure-footed and can walk well on land. Their diet is mostly vegetarian, and grain-fed Mallards or Northern Pintails or acorn-fattened Wood Ducks are highly regarded table birds.

# Mallards



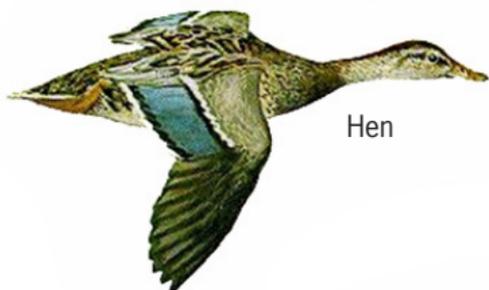
Typical Flock Pattern



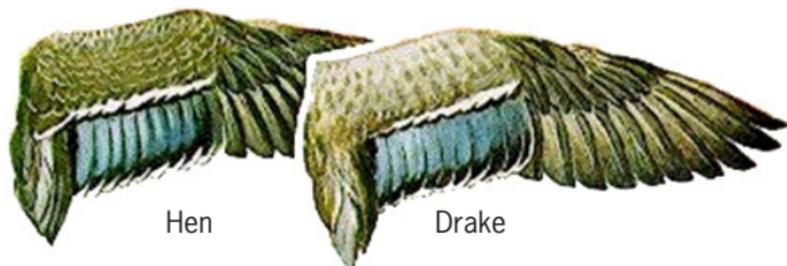
Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen

Drake

# Mallards

(*Anas platyrhynchos*)

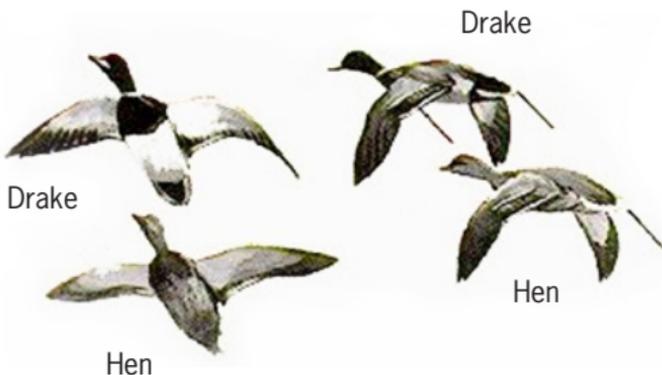
Length: 61 cm

Weight: 1250 g

The Mallard is our most common duck, and is found in every region of Canada. The males are often called greenheads. The main wintering areas are the lower Mississippi basin and the Gulf of Mexico, but many Mallards stay further north as open water permits.

Whole flocks leave the water at dawn and dusk to eat their fill in neighbouring fields, returning to marshes and creeks to spend the night.

The flight is not particularly rapid. Hens have a rather loud *quack*; the drake's call is similar, but deeper.



# Northern Pintails



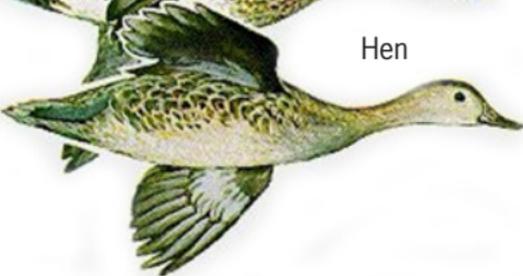
Typical Flock Pattern



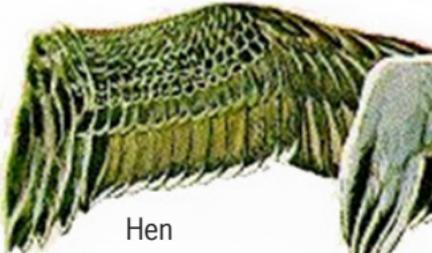
Drake



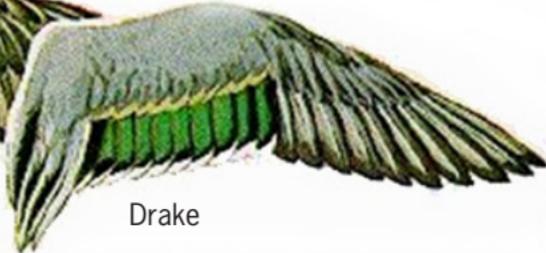
Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake

# Northern Pintails

(*Anas acuta*)

Length: 66 cm

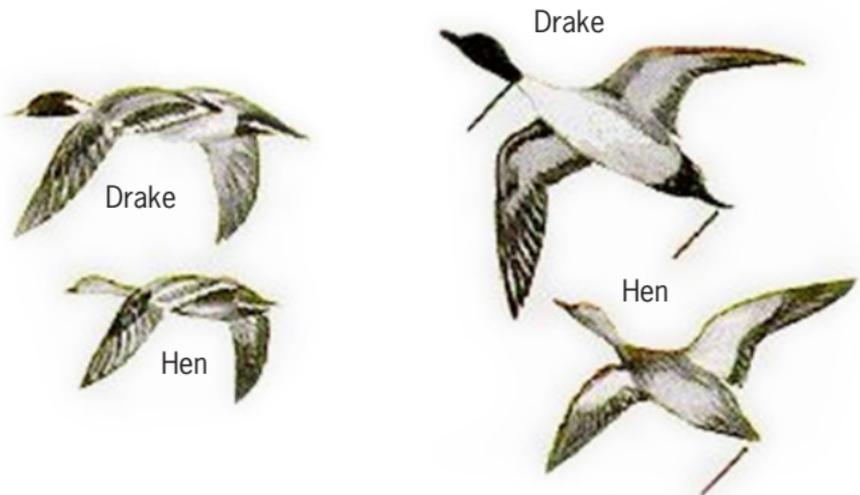
Weight: 795 g

These ducks are found scattered throughout Canada, but are more common in the west.

This bird is very graceful and a fast flier, fond of zigzagging down from great heights before landing.

Its long neck and tail make it look longer than the Mallard, although it is smaller and lighter.

They are agile on land and often feed in grain fields. The drakes whistle; the hens have a rather coarse *quack*.



# Gadwalls



Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen

## **Gadwalls**

*(Anas strepera)*

Length: 53 cm

Weight: 910 g

Gadwalls are most common on the Prairies, but not too common elsewhere although, during the breeding season, they are being spotted more and more frequently on certain islands in the St. Lawrence. They are one of the earliest migrants in fall, seldom facing cold weather.

They are the only dabbling ducks with a white speculum.

Small, compact flocks fly swiftly, usually in a direct line and with rapid wingbeats. Drakes whistle and call *kack-kack*; hens *quack* like a Mallard, but more softly.

# American Wigeons



Typical Flock Pattern



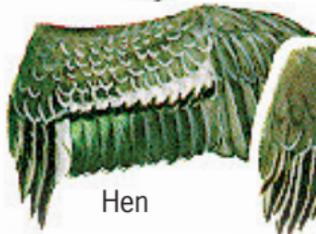
Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake

# American Wigeons

(*Anas americana*)

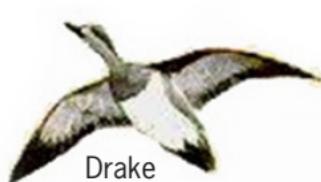
Length: 53 cm

Weight: 795 g

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

When open water is handy, American Wigeons often raft up far offshore until dusk, when they move to marshes and ponds to feed.

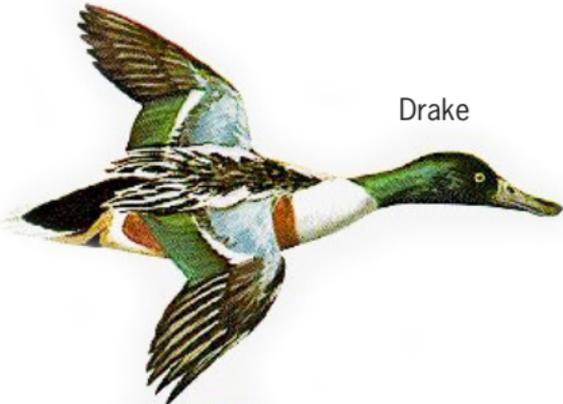
The white belly and forewing of American Wigeons, which stand out against the rest of the body, are very easy to recognize in the air. Drakes whistle; hens have a loud *kaow* and a lower *qua-awk*.



# Northern Shovelers



Typical Flock Pattern



Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen

Drake

# Northern Shovelers

(*Anas clypeata*)

Length: 50 cm

Weight: 680 g

Northern Shovelers are early migrants, moving out at the first frost. They nest mainly in the Prairies.

Their flight is steady and direct. When startled, the small flocks twist and turn in the air like teals.

American Wigeons are not highly regarded as table birds, because a third of their usual diet is animal matter. The drake calls *woh-woh* and *took-took*; the hen's *quack* is feeble.



# Blue-winged Teals



Typical Flock Pattern



Drake



Eclipse Drake

Hen



Hen



Drake

# Blue-winged Teals

(*Anas discors*)

Length: 41 cm

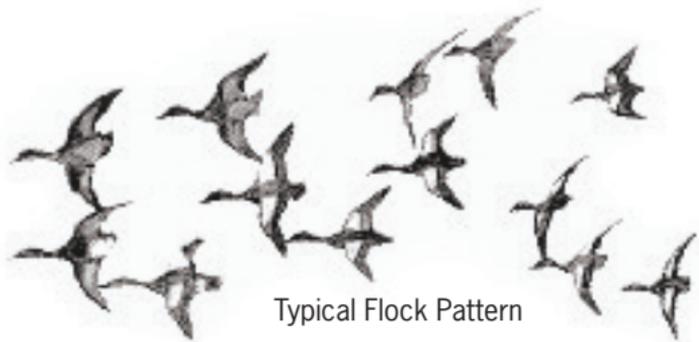
Weight: 425 g

Their small size, and twisting and looping flight gives the illusion of great speed. The small, compact flocks commonly fly low over the surface of the marshes, and often take hunters by surprise. They are more vocal than most other ducks—their high-pitched peeping and nasal quacking is commonly heard in spring and, to a lesser extent, in fall.

Blue-winged Teal are among the first ducks to migrate each fall, and one of the last to return in the spring.



# Cinnamon Teals



Typical Flock Pattern

Eclipse Drake



Drake



Hen



Drake

# Cinnamon Teals

(*Anas cyanoptera*)

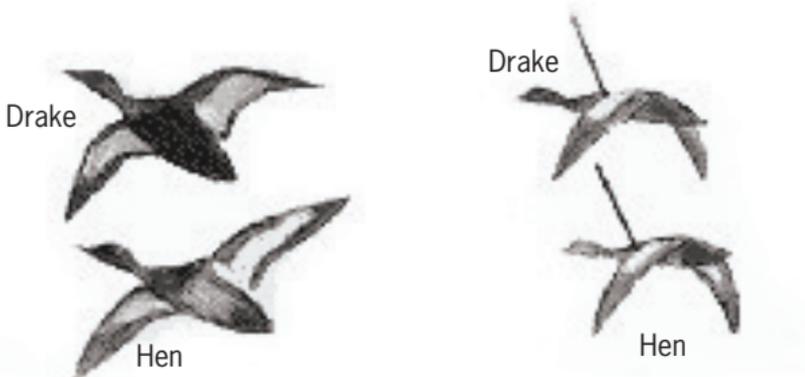
Length: 41 cm

Weight: 425 g

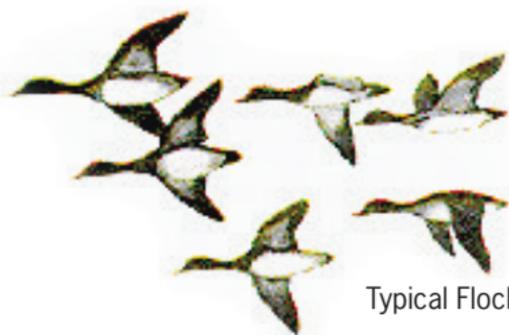
In southern British Columbia and in Alberta, Cinnamon Teals are as common as Blue-wing Teals. The hens of both species look alike and the two species have similar habits.

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

Drakes have a whistling *peep*; hens utter a barely audible *quack*.



# Green-winged Teals



Typical Flock Pattern



Drake

Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake

# Green-winged Teals

(*Anas crecca*)

Length: 38 cm

Weight: 400 g

Green-winged Teals are quite hardy: some birds travel as far north as open water is found.

These birds are the smallest of our ducks and one of the most common. Their tiny size gives the impression of great speed, but Mallards can fly even faster. The flight of the Green-winged Teal is often low and erratic, with the entire flock twisting and turning as a single group.

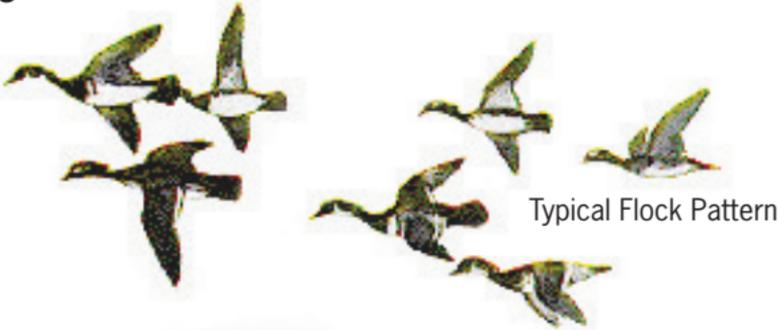
Green-winged Teals nest as far north as the tundra, and migrate in all regions.

Drakes usually migrate in early fall, and are still in full eclipse plumage.

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



# Wood Ducks



# Wood Ducks

(*Aix sponsa*)

Length: 47 cm

Weight: 680 g

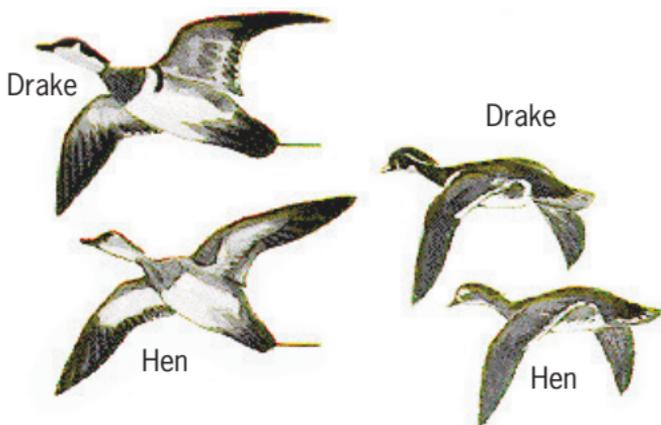
While Wood Ducks nest mainly in the United States, this species is very common in Ontario and Quebec as well.

These are early migrants; most Wood Ducks have left southern Canada by mid October.

Wood Ducks frequent wooded ponds and watercourses, and perch in trees. They fly through dense forests with speed and ease and feed on acorns, berries and grapes on the forest floor.

Flight is swift and direct, and in flocks. In the air, the wings of Wood Ducks make a rustling, swishing sound.

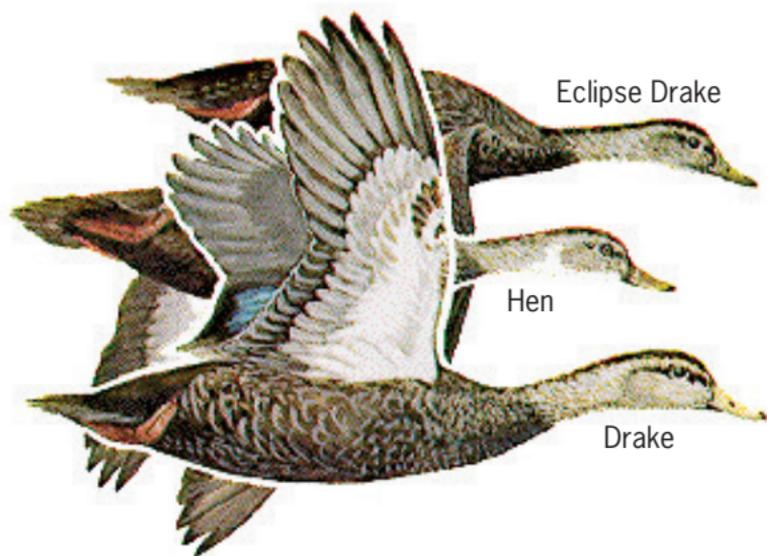
Drakes call a deep *hoo-w-ett*, even in flight; hens have a sharp *cr-r-ek* call when frightened.



# Black Ducks



Typical Flock Pattern



Eclipse Drake

Hen

Drake



Hen



Drake

# Black Ducks

(*Anas rubripes*)

Length: 61 cm

Weight: 1250 g

This waterfowl is found in eastern Canada. It is the most common large dabbling duck in Quebec and the Maritimes. Fearful and mistrustful, it is the wariest of all ducks.

Black Ducks are often seen in the company of Mallards, but frequent the salt marshes and ocean much more often than Mallards.

Flight is swift, usually in small flocks.

The white wing lining, which contrasts against the very dark body plumage, is a good identification clue. The cries of both sexes are the same as those of Mallards.

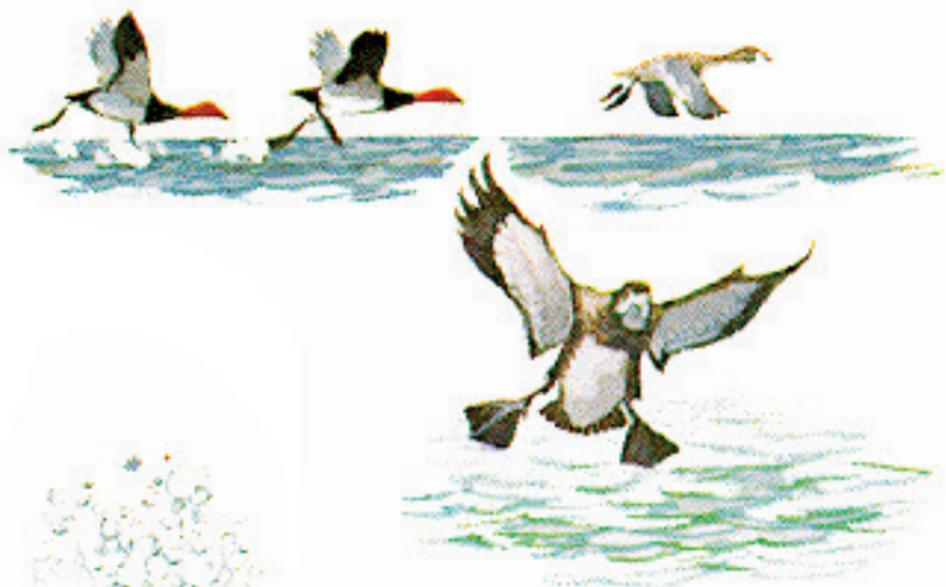


Similar Sexes



## Diving Ducks

Takeoff



Landing



Feeding

## Diving Ducks

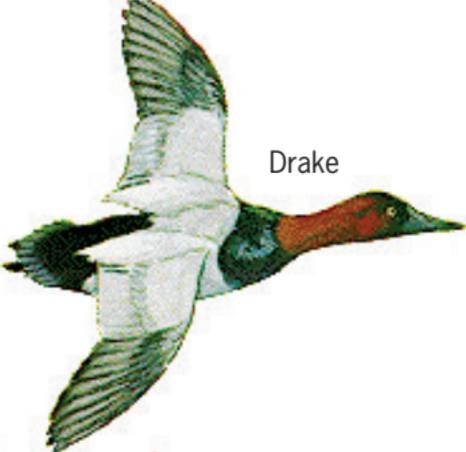
Diving ducks frequent broad, deep lakes and rivers, and coastal bays and inlets.

The coloured wing patches of these birds lack the brilliance of the speculums of dabbling ducks. Since many of them have short tails, their broad, webbed feet are used as rudders in flight, and are often visible on flying birds. When launching into flight, most diving ducks must 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 diet consists of fish, shellfish, mollusks and aquatic plants, which makes them, as a group, less desirable table birds for hunters. Canvasbacks and Redheads, which fatten on eel grass or wild celery, are delicious exceptions.

Since their wings are smaller in proportion to their body size and weight, diving ducks have a much more rapid wingbeat than dabbling ducks.

# Canvasbacks

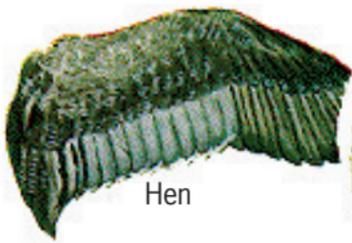


Drake

Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake

# Canvasbacks

(*Aythya valisineria*)

Length: 56 cm  
Weight: 1360 g

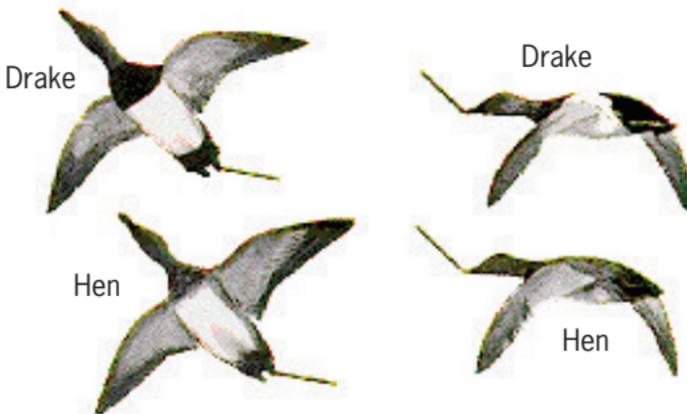
Normally late in heading south, flocks of Canvasbacks migrate in lines and irregular V's.

In feeding areas, compact flocks fly in changing formations. Their wingbeat is rapid and noisy; they are the swiftest flyers of all our ducks.

Feeding behaviour is highly variable. In some regions, Canvasbacks feed at night and spend the day rafted up far offshore; in other areas, they feed inshore mornings and evenings.

On the water, body size and head shape distinguish Canvasbacks from Greater Scaups, Lesser Scaups and Redheads.

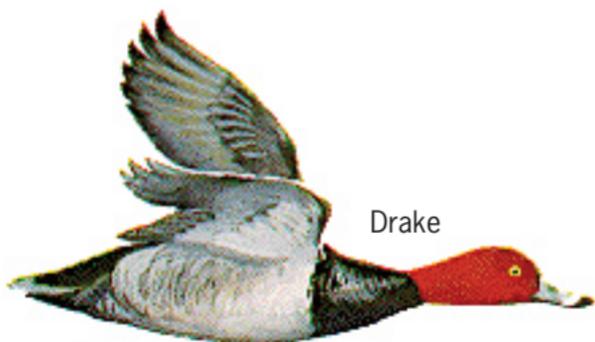
Drakes *croak*, *peep*, and *growl*; hens have a Mallard-like *quack*.



# Redheads



Typical Flock Pattern



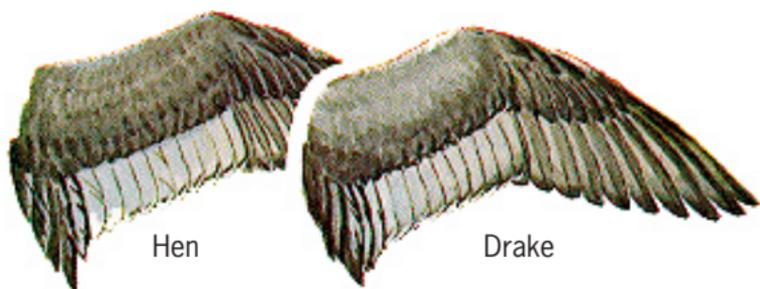
Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen

Drake

# Redheads

(*Aythya americana*)

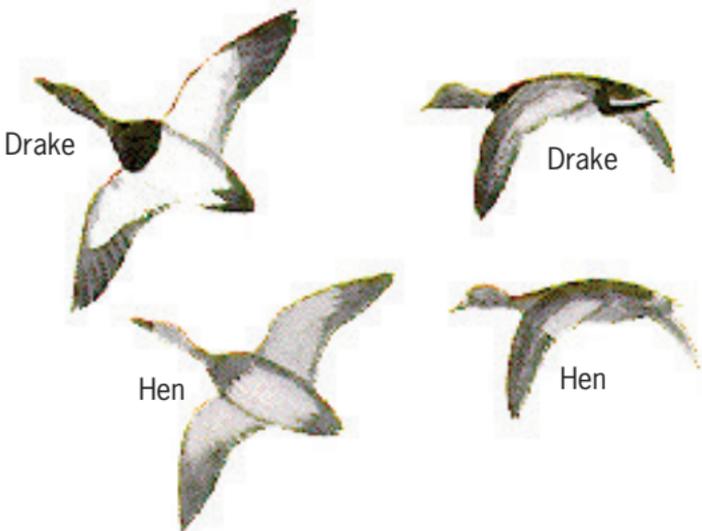
Length: 51 cm  
Weight: 1135 g

Redheads nest mainly in western Canada but, during migrations, near the Great Lakes also.

Migratory flocks travel in V's, moving in irregular formations over feeding areas. Often found associating with Canvasbacks, they give the impression in the air of always being in a hurry because of their rapid wingbeat.

Redheads usually spend the whole day in flocks looking for deep water, and feed at dawn and dusk in shallower water.

Drakes *purr* and *meow*; hens have a raucous *squack*, higher than that of a Mallard hen.

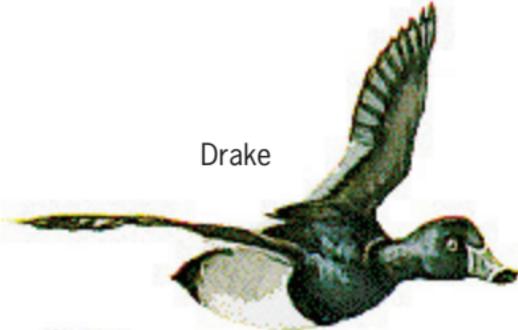


# Ring-necked Ducks

Typical Flock Pattern



Drake



Eclipse Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake

# Ring-necked Ducks

(*Aythya collaris*)

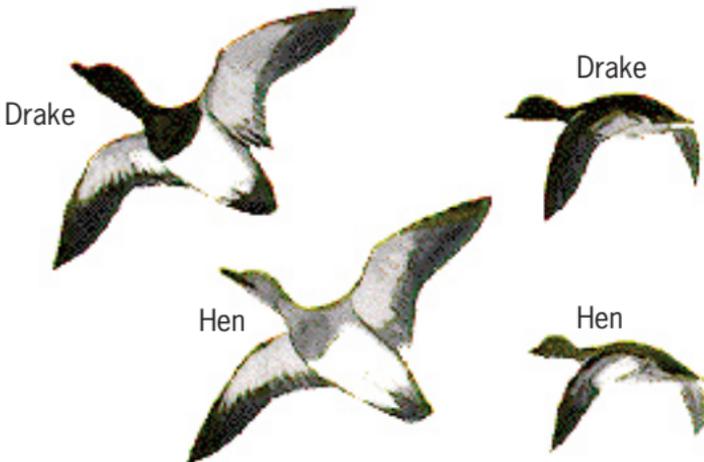
Length: 43 cm

Weight: 1135 g

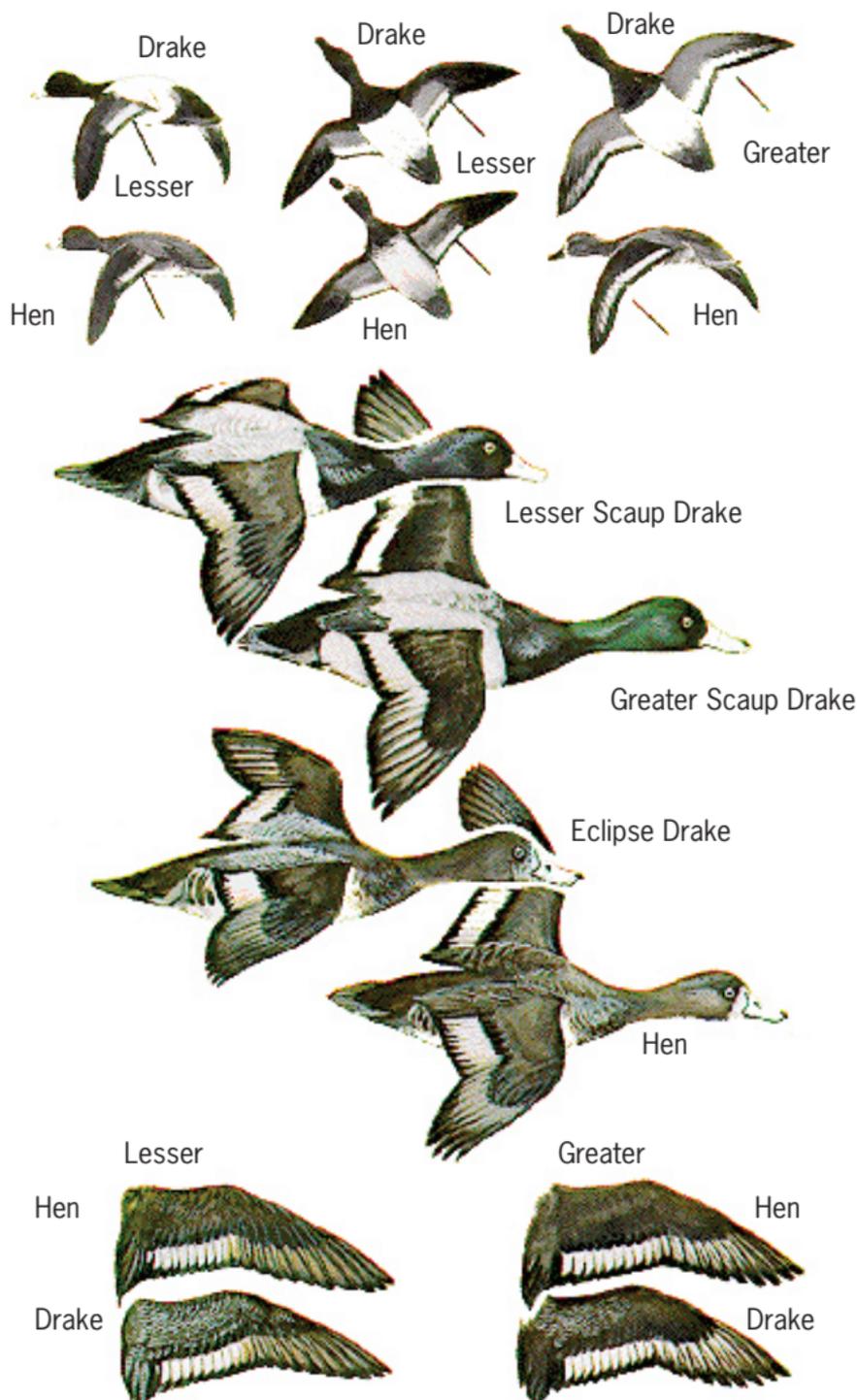
Ring-necked Ducks are similar in appearance to Greater and Lesser Scaups, but are more often found in freshwater marshes and wooded ponds. In flight, the dark wings of the Ring-necked Duck are different from the white-edged wings of Greater and Lesser Scaups.

The narrow brownish ring on the drake's neck never shows in the field. Two light bands at the tip and the base of the bill are conspicuous.

Ring-necked Ducks fly as small flocks in open formation; they often land without circling. Drakes *purr*; hens are usually silent.



# Greater and Lesser Scaups



# Greater and Lesser Scaups

## Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*):

Length: 47 cm

Weight: 910 g

## Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*):

Length: 43 cm

Weight: 850 g



Typical Flock Pattern

Except for their wing marks, Greater and Lesser Scaups appear nearly identical in the field, seen from afar.

The light band near the trailing edge of the wings runs almost to the tip in the Greater Scaup, but only halfway in the Lesser Scaup.

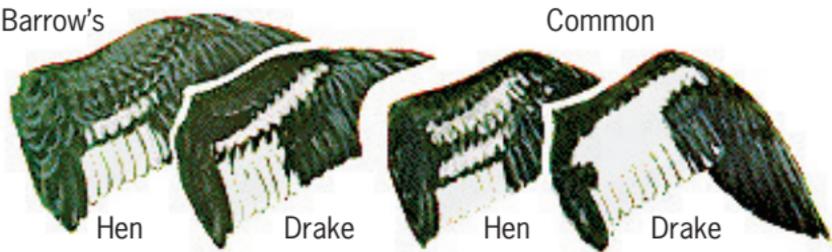
Greater Scaup prefer large expanses of open water; Lesser Scaup often use marshes and ponds.

Both species migrate late, sometimes just before freeze-up.

Scaups usually fly in compact groups, with rapid wingbeats; their flight formation is usually irregular.

Hens are silent. Lesser Scaup drakes *purr*; and Greater Scaup drakes have a discordant *scaup, scaup*.

# Goldeneyes



# Goldeneyes

## Common Goldeneye

(*Bucephala clangula*):

Length: 48 cm

Weight: 1020 g

## Barrow's Goldeneye

(*Bucephala islandica*):

Length: 48 cm

Weight: 1250 g



Typical Flock Pattern

Golden-eyes are very active, strong-winged fliers moving singly or in small flocks, often high in the air. Their distinctive wing-whistling sound in flight has earned them the name of whistlers.

Golden-eyes generally move south late in the season; most of them winter on Atlantic and Pacific coastal waters and in the Great Lakes region. Inland, they like rapids and fast water, and the St. Lawrence estuary in Quebec, which suits their needs.

Barrow's Golden-eye, predominantly a westerner, is less wary than the Common Golden-eye.

The hens of both species are look-alikes.

Drakes have a piercing *speer-speer*, while hens have a kind of piercing and deep *quack*. Both are usually quiet.

# Goldeneyes

Drake



Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake



Eclipse Drake

Hen



Hen



Drake



# Buffleheads

(*Bucephala albeola*)

Length: 37 cm  
Weight: 450 g

A few individuals migrate south in mid-fall, but most travel just ahead of freeze-up. Most flocks in feeding areas are small—five or six birds, with more hens and immatures than adult drakes.

Very small size, the black-and-white colour pattern and low, swift flight are field marks. Unlike most divers, Buffleheads can fly straight up from a watery take-off.

The largest concentrations are found on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States and along the Gulf of Mexico.

During the nesting season, however, they are found mainly in Alberta and British Columbia.

These waterfowl are usually silent. Drakes voice a low *squeak* and guttural notes; hens *quack* weakly.



# Ruddy Ducks



Typical Flock Pattern



Summer Drake



Winter Drake

Hen



Sexes Similar



# Ruddy Ducks

(*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

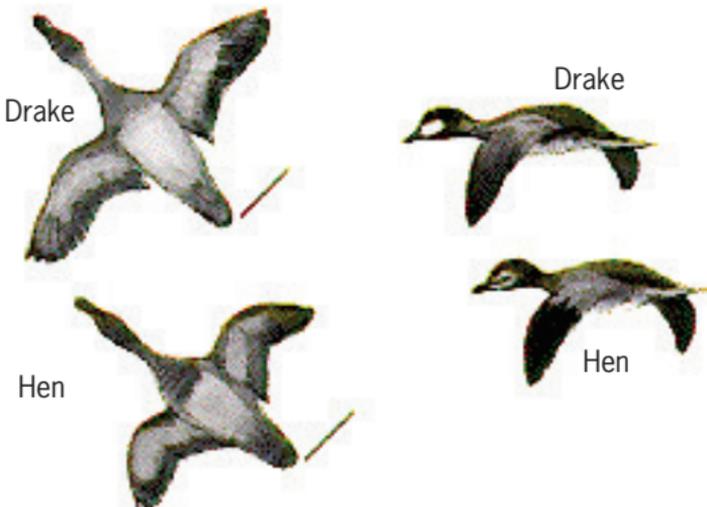
Length: 40 cm  
Weight: 600 g

Ruddy Ducks often dive or swim away from danger rather than flying. When flying, their small wings stroke so fast that they hum. They are found mainly in western Canada.

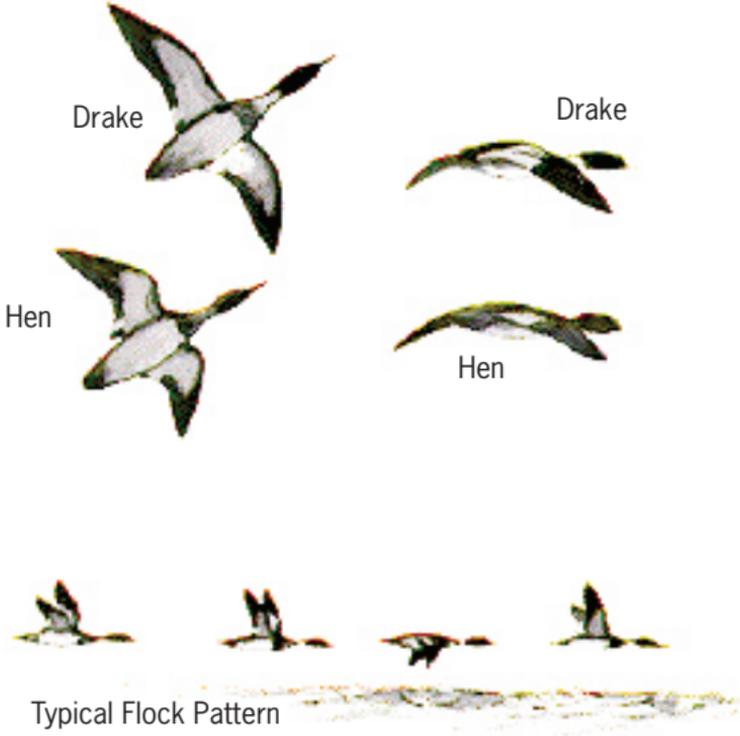
These waterfowl migrate in mid-fall at the latest.

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

Both hens and drakes are generally silent in the fall.



# Red-breasted Mergansers



# **Red-breasted Mergansers**

*(Mergus serrator)*

Length: 58 cm

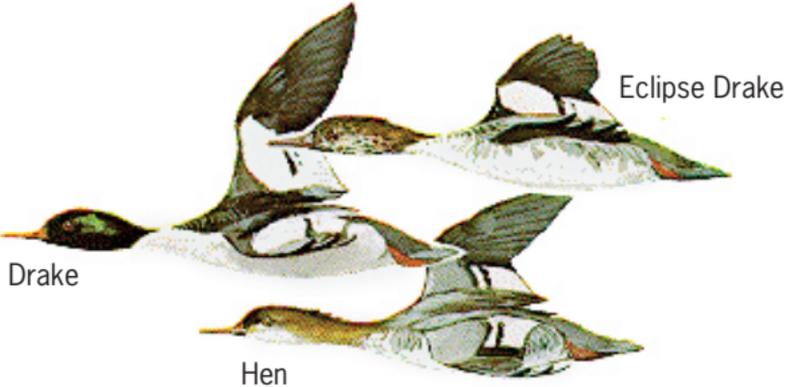
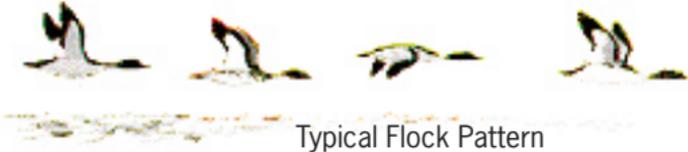
Weight: 1135 g

These birds winter most frequently in Atlantic and Pacific coastal waters, and along the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes.

Their flight, which is fast and direct, is usually low over the water. They are difficult to distinguish in flight from Common Mergansers.

They are generally silent.

# Common Mergansers



# Common Mergansers

(*Mergus merganser*)

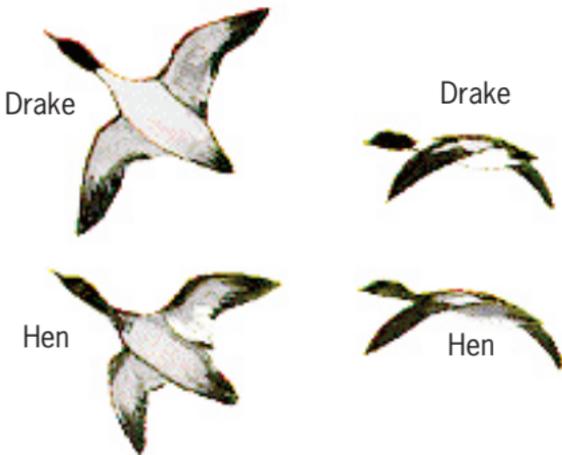
Length: 65 cm

Weight: 1135 g

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.

Their only call seems to be a startled *croak* of alarm.



# Hooded Mergansers



Drake



Drake

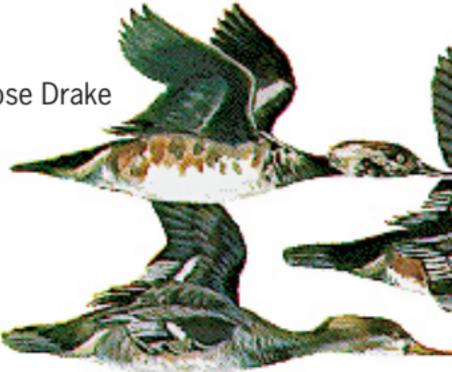


Hen



Hen

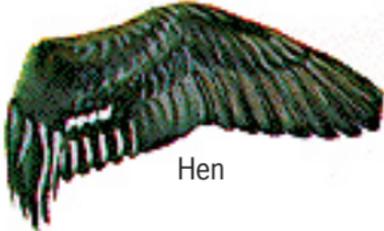
Eclipse Drake



Drake



Hen



Hen



Drake

## **Hooded Mergansers**

*(Lophodytes cucullatus)*

Length: 45 cm

Weight: 680 g

Hooded Mergansers are often seen in pairs, or very small flocks. Their short, rapid wingstrokes create an impression of great speed.

The Hooded Merganser breeds in eastern Canada, where it is most common in southern Ontario and Quebec.

The birds are generally silent in fall.

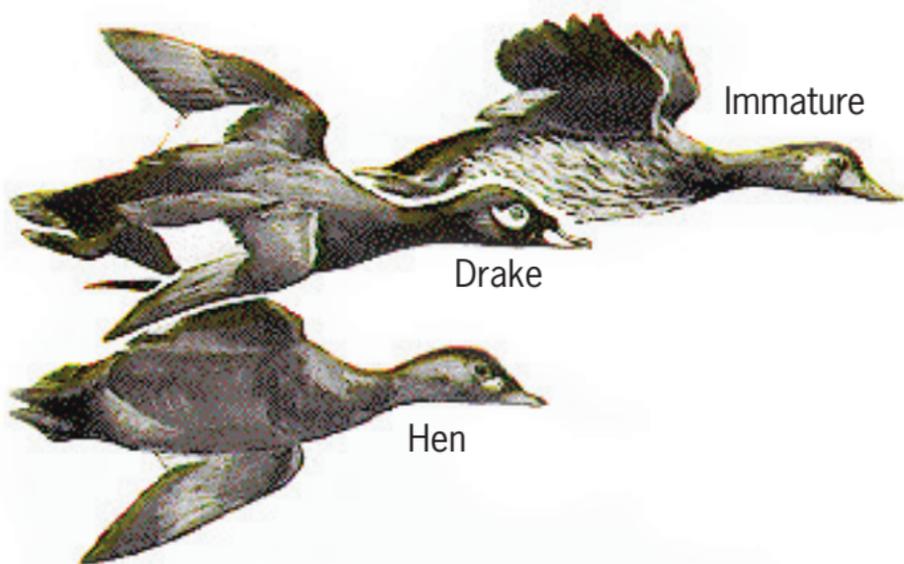
# White-Winged Scoters

(*Melanitta fusca*)

Length: 55 cm

Weight: 1590 g

Scoters are sea ducks; they winter in ice-free coastal waters. White-winged Scoters are among the heaviest and largest of all ducks.



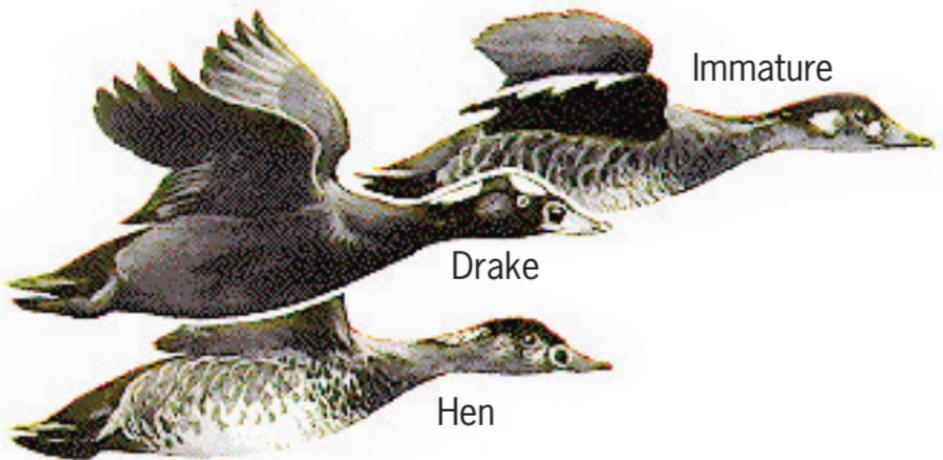
# Surf Scoters

(*Melanitta perspicillata*)

Length: 50 cm

Weight: 907 g

Like all scoters, Surf Scoters fly in loose flocks, stringing into irregular, wavy lines. The drakes can be distinguished from the drakes of other scoter subspecies by the two white patches on their head and the bright colour of the bill. In Canada, the Surf Scoter breeds from the Northwest Territories, in the Hudson Bay lowlands in Manitoba and Ontario, and throughout central Quebec and Labrador.



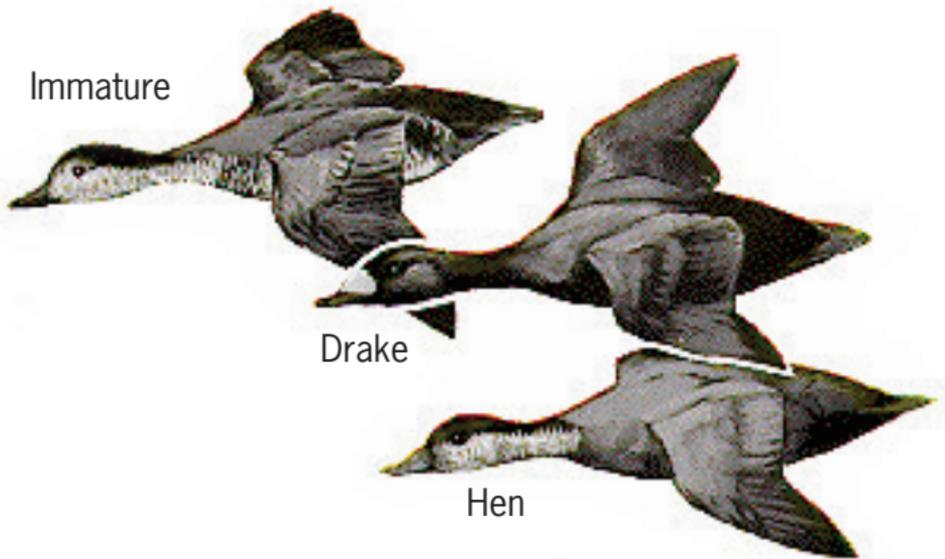
# Black Scoters

(*Melanitta americana*)

Length: 50 cm  
Weight: 1135 g

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

Scoters feed on mullusks, crabs, some fish and a few plants.



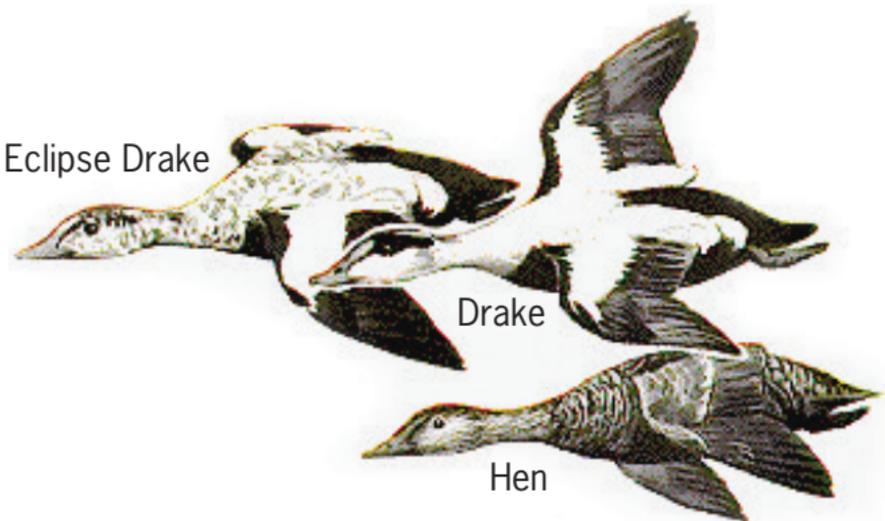
# Common Eiders

(*Somateria mollissima*)

Length: 60 cm  
Weight: 2270 g

Common Eiders are thick-necked, stocky birds, alternately flapping and sailing in flight. They join flocks that string out in a line, close to the water. In Canada, the species is found mainly along the Atlantic coasts.

The other eiders—King Eiders, Spectacled Eiders and Steller's Eiders—are found in Alaska and are not illustrated in this guide.



# Long-tailed Ducks

(*Clangula hyemalis*)

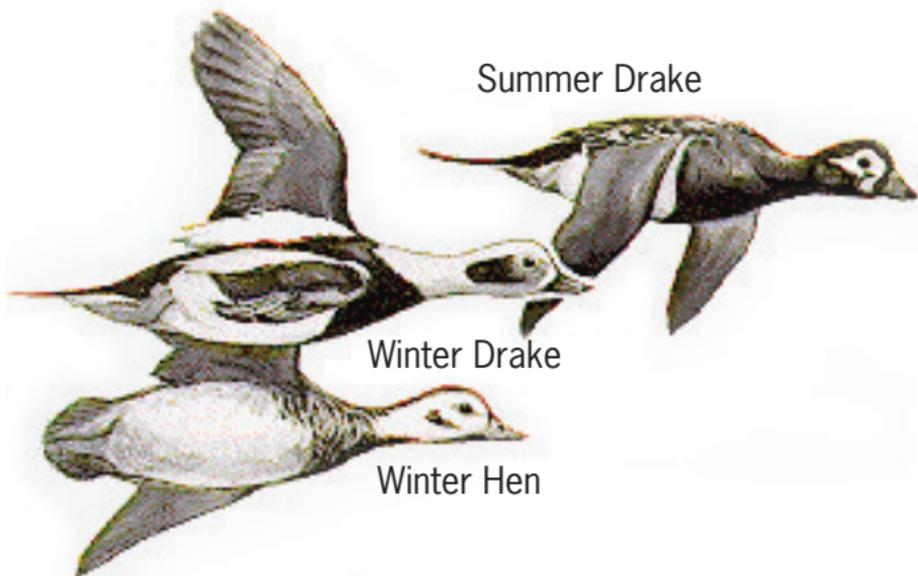
Length: 52 cm

Weight: 907 g

Long-tailed Ducks are slim, brightly plumaged sea ducks and are smaller than scoters and eiders.

Flight is swift and low with constantly changing flock formations. Long-tailed Ducks are found along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and the Great Lakes.

Drakes have a loud, pleasant *caloo caloo*, which is heard throughout the year.



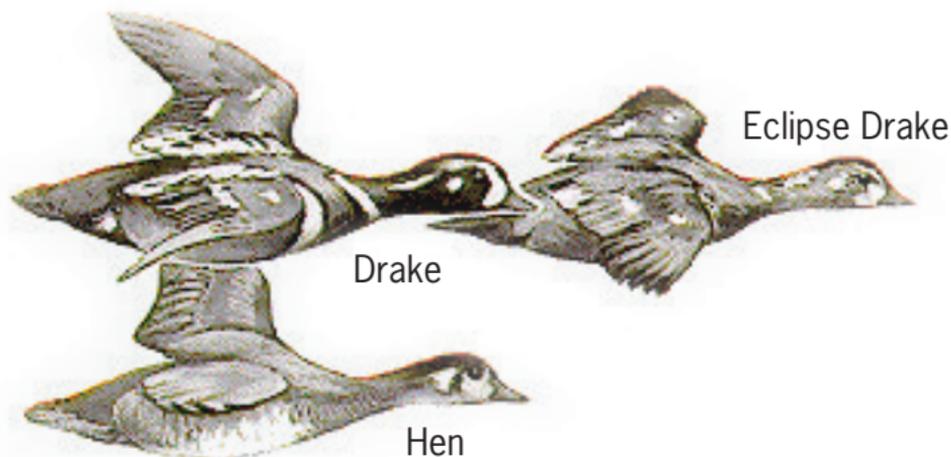
## Harlequin Ducks

(*Histrionicus histrionicus*)

Length: 43 cm

Weight: 680 g

Glossy slate-blue plumage enlivened by white stripes and patches give Harlequin Duck drakes a striking appearance. The female resembles a small female scoter. This is a fairly rare bird, whose range is limited to the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.



# Swans



Trumpeter



Immature: Both Species



Whistling

# Swans

## Trumpeter Swans

(*Cygnus buccinator*):

Length: 150 cm

Weight: 12 700 g

## Tundra Swans

(*Cygnus columbianus*):

Length: 132 cm

Weight: 7260 g

Once rare, Trumpeter Swans are slowly making a come-back. They nest mainly in Alaska, but also in Alberta and the western United States. They winter in British Columbia and some western states.

Whistling Swans are already common and also increasing. They nest in the Northwest Territories, and winter near Chesapeake Bay, San Francisco Bay, and Puget Sound in the United States.

## **Canada Geese** (*Branta canadensis*)

Length: 58 cm to 109 cm

Weight: 1360 g to 5400 g

An abundant species, Canada Geese are often called honkers for their characteristic call. There are several subspecies of Canada Geese, varying in weight from 1 kg to over 5 kg. All have black heads and necks, white cheeks, the same habitats and calls. Both sexes have identical plumage.



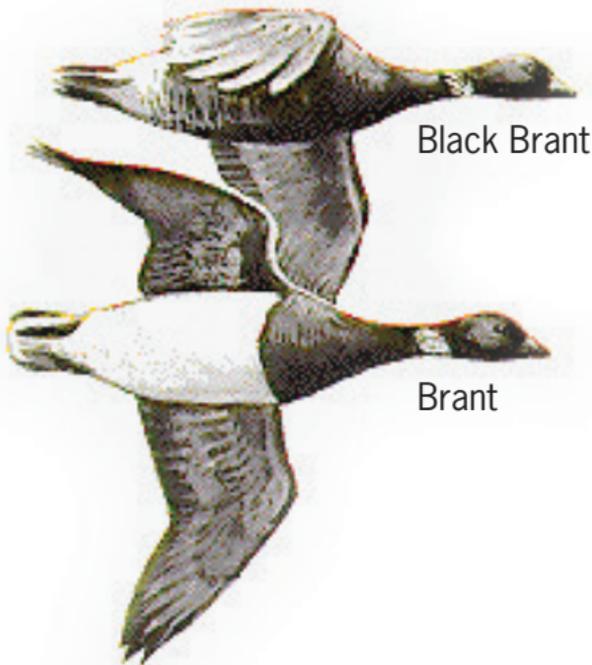
# Brants

*(Branta bernicla)*

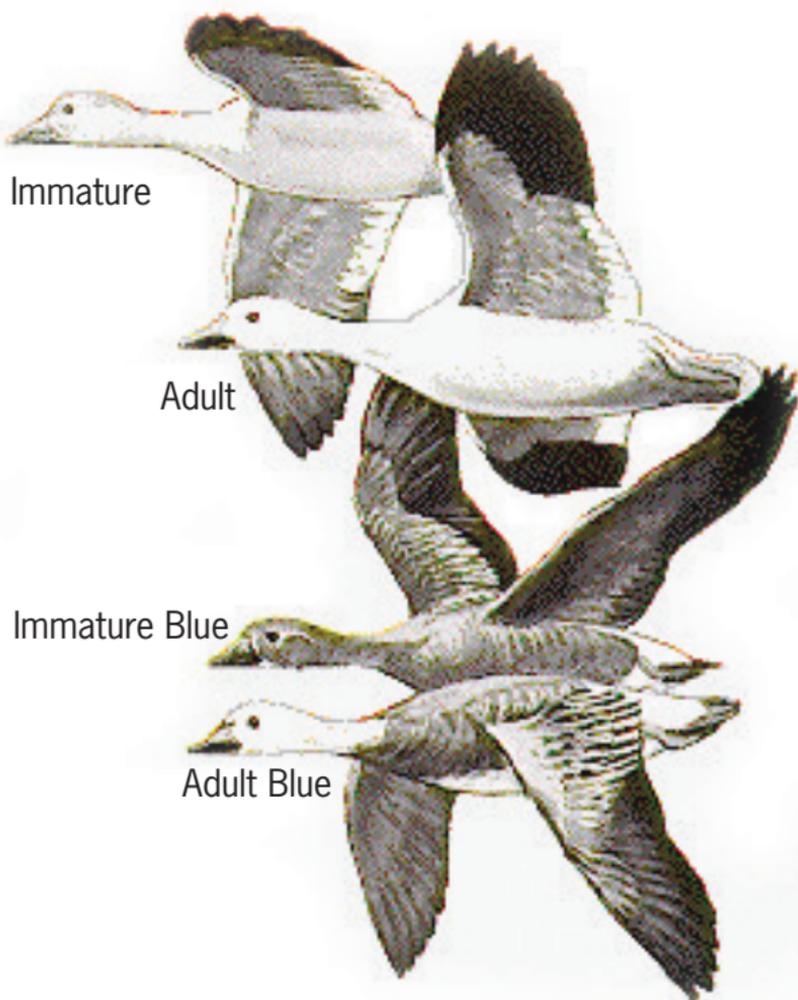
Length: 60 cm to 64 cm

Weight: 1475 g to 1700 g

Flight is swift, in irregular and changing flock patterns. In Canada, Brants breed along the coasts in the Artic.



# Snow Geese



# **Snow Geese**

## **Greater Snow Geese**

*(Chen caerulescens atlantica)*

## **Lesser Snow Geese**

*(Chen caerulescens caerulescens)*

Length: 74 cm to 79 cm

Weight: 2950 g to 3400 g

Two subspecies of Snow Geese are recognized: Greater Snow Geese along the Atlantic coast, and Lesser Snow Geese, which are found elsewhere on the continent. Blue Geese are a colour phase of Lesser Snow Geese.

# Greater White-fronted Geese

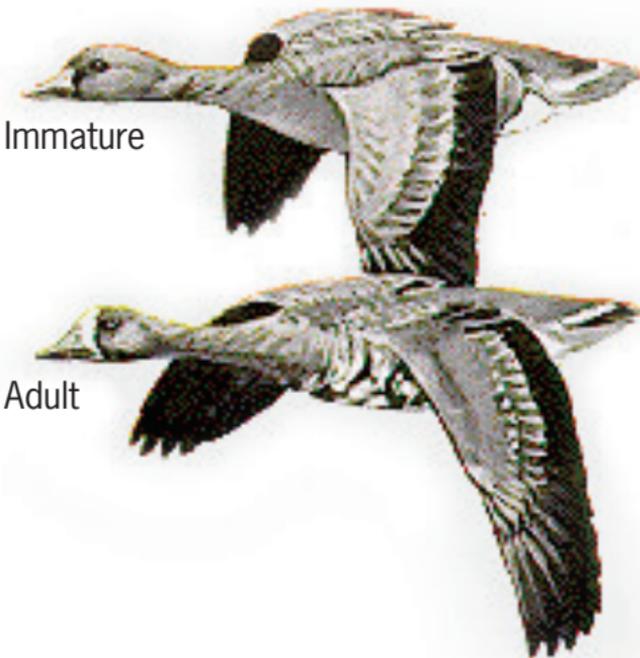
(*Anser albifrons*)

Length: 74 cm to 79 cm

Weight: 2835 g

Greater White-fronted Geese migrate chiefly in the Prairies. In flight, they appear brownish grey, and their breasts and bellies have highly visible, irregular markings.

A distinctive characteristic of the V-shaped flocks is the high-pitched, sharp *kow-kow-kow-kow* cry.





# Comparative Sizes



Pintail



Mallard



Black Duck



Gadwall



Wigeon



Shoveler



Wood Duck



Cinnamon Teal



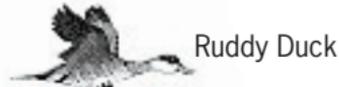
Blue-winged Teal



Green-winged Teal



Bufflehead



Ruddy Duck



Ringneck



Lesser Scaup



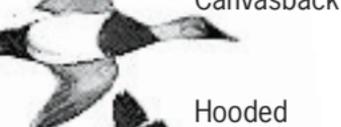
Greater Scaup



Goldeneye



Redhead



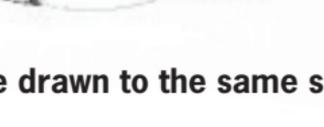
Canvasback



Hooded Merganser



Red-breasted Merganser



Common Merganser

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

# of Waterfowl



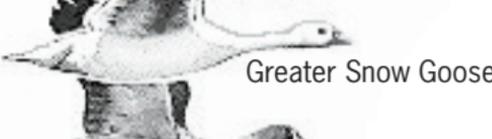
Trumpeter Swan



Whistling Swan



Canada Goose



Greater Snow Goose



White-Fronted Goose



Lesser Canada Goose



Lesser Snow Goose



Emperor Goose



Black Brant



Brant



Cackling Goose



Ross' Goose



Harlequin



Oldsquaw



Whistling Ducks



Surf Scoter



Common Scoter



White-winged Scoter

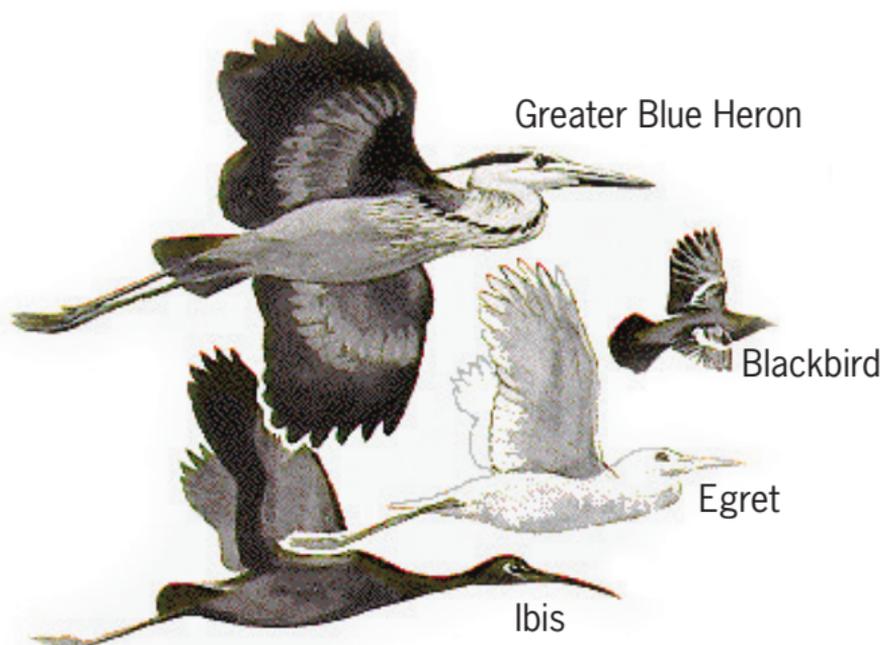


Common Eider

# Wetlands Attract Wildlife

Our marshes attract a great diversity of other birds besides ducks. Knowing and identifying them adds to the enjoyment of being in a blind.

The same sources of food and shelter that draw waterfowl to ponds and marshes are also important to other wildlife species, which sometimes outnumber ducks and geese.



Cormorant

White Pelican

Black Tern

Common Tern

Marsh Hawk

Yellowlegs

Herring Gull

Dowitcher



Grebe

Short-eared Owl

**WWW.ec.gc.ca**

Additional information can be obtained at:

Environment Canada

Inquiry Centre

10 Wellington Street, 23rd Floor

Gatineau QC K1A 0H3

Telephone: 1-800-668-6767 (in Canada only)

or 819-997-2800

Fax: 819-994-1412

TTY: 819-994-0736

Email: [enviroinfo@ec.gc.ca](mailto:enviroinfo@ec.gc.ca)